

You Shall Be My Witnesses
April 19, 2020

Last week was Easter. We celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, for the next four weeks will have some stories from those days after the resurrection, and some stories from the beginning of the church.

So today's reading from Acts 1 is a story of being in-between, in-between the way things have been and before the new has begun. The disciples had travelled with Jesus for three years. Each evening they had gathered around the fire, listening to his stories. During the day they watched how he welcomed people of all kinds, how he loved people. They heard him describe what the kingdom of God was all about.

And they realized how accepting he had been of them in all their differences. Matthew had worked for the Roman government as a tax collector; Simon the Zealot was on the other side of the political aisle: he wanted to overthrow the government. Imagine the conversations they had around the campfire. And Jesus loved each of them, and pointed them both in the direction of the reign of God.

And then, after his death and resurrection, they experienced his presence again, in some form of spiritual body that we don't know about yet. There is story after story of him appearing to his followers after his death. So Luke, who travelled with Paul, writes a second book after his gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, describing what happens when these disciples carry on in the name of Jesus. Acts is the story of the founding of the church. I'm going to spend the next four Sundays in the Book of the Acts.

Luke writes in Acts 1: 3- "After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." Notice he continued to speak with them about the kingdom of God. This is what the reign of God, the ecosystem of God, looks like, and acts like, and forgives like, and loves like, and serves like. The early disciples of Jesus will live out the reign of God, especially as they reach out to all people, including the hated Gentiles.

But Luke says they are looking in the wrong direction. Luke says during these forty days after Easter, the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Lord, we remember those great times around the campfire at night, when we were pretty sure you were planning to have us help you overthrow the Roman occupiers. And then they put you to death on a cross and messed everything up. And now you're back again. Is this when you will take up the sword and get rid of our enemies?

And Jesus says, Wrong question. I'm not interested in using force to overthrow anybody. Here's what he says: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." It's not your business to think about when God will bring this age to an end, and usher in a new heaven and earth. It's not your job to speculate, pontificate, elaborate about the end times. In fact, he says, I believe you ought to hesitate, because only God knows that stuff. It's not your job!

The disciples are so like we are. They are looking back at some glorious times with Jesus around the campfire. Can we go back to that, Jesus? Back to when we thought you might bring in the kingdom as we pictured it? Is this when you'll restore the kingdom to Israel? Some of us think, If only we could go back to some idyllic time, when sports weren't competing with Sunday morning and the youth group was big and we didn't have to worry about what language we used for things and there wasn't so much change going on. The disciples thought that too. They were looking in the rearview mirror.

And Jesus says, We can't go back to those times around the campfire! We're moving ahead! We're going out in concentric circles to tell the world that there is new life and forgiveness of sins and healing and freedom from oppression and release from the demons that hold us back.

I do have a job for you, and here's what it is. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

And don't worry if that seems like too much for you, because it is! It's way too much for you to do in your own strength. That's why I am sending the Holy Spirit to give you the power you need.

And how shall we be witnesses? What does that look like and sound like? When I was sixteen I was part of a witnessing effort that took me to Dallas,

Texas, to stand at bus stops and share the gospel with strangers. And here is what witnessing sounded like- God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life. The problem is, you have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. Here's the good news- Jesus died on the cross for you, and if you say this prayer and accept him in your heart, when you die you will go to heaven. And if you don't, you'll spend an eternity in conscious torment. That was being a witness, getting someone to say that prayer.

I have a different view about what being a witness is all about now. Let's look to Jesus. What was Jesus talking about with his disciples during his earthly ministry and during those last forty days? The reign of God. Our job as witnesses is to point people to the reign of God, to point people to the life Jesus lived.

I believe being a witness is to love God and to love our neighbor, and that is at the heart of all the world's religions, to treat others as we want to be treated. To witness to Jesus is to love Jesus and his ways with all our heart, and humbly share what we have experienced, while listening to the spiritual stories of others.

Being a witness means working with people of other faiths and secular groups for the common good.

Being a witness means working with people of goodwill for the healing of the world.

Somebody sent me a quote from the science fiction writer H.G. Wells. He wrote a story called *The Days of the Comet* in 1906, when everybody had to stay inside because of the danger of a comet that was passing by. Listen to how prescient these words are- "And the people stayed home. And read books. And listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being. And were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated. Some prayed. Some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently. And the people healed. And in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal. And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed."

Who knows how God is going to use this pandemic for our healing and for the healing of the world?

And yes, God will do the transforming. God opens our eyes and hearts to new ways of being. After all, Jesus says to his followers, You can't be witnesses on your own. You will need the Spirit's help.

And I humbly submit that the Spirit is at work in the world and in other people in ways I cannot imagine. Jesus says in John 3, The Spirit is like the wind, and we don't know the direction it's going to blow. God is all about transformation. Do you notice that among the people waiting for the Holy Spirit are Jesus' brothers? Do you remember that his family showed up one day in the crowd to take him away, because they thought he was crazy? But now they are his followers. We can expect transformation in our lives and in our world if we live out the reign of God that we see in Jesus, whether we name Jesus as Lord or not. Again, God does the work in and through us.

Four years ago, the Haggen Food and Pharmacy that was next door to the church closed. It was right around Easter, and I wrote an article about loss and grief in our newsletter, and talked about the loss that those workers were experiencing. It was an example of what many workers are dealing with now. One of the last days it was open, I spoke with one of the grocery clerks, and discovered that she was not only losing her job of many years, but had lost her mother as well. I went to the dry cleaners and as I was coming back, I noticed that she had taken a break with a co-worker at the corner of the store.

I walked up to them, and asked her about her mother. Had her mother died unexpectedly? No, she said, she passed away after suffering for a while, having dementia. I mentioned that I was the pastor at the church next door, and that I came to the church just before Haggen was built, so I felt like we arrived together. I told both employees we'd be praying for them as they look for employment, and as she works through her double grief.

When I came back to the office, I found a note from one of our members saying to give her a call. When she answered the phone, she said, I was at Haggen earlier today, and mentioned that I belong to this Lutheran church next door. And the employee (a different one than I had spoken with) said, Oh, your pastor wrote an article in your newsletter, and asked you all to pray

for us. We put the article up in our break room. He talked about change, and it's helped me let go of some of my anger and start to move on.

You know, I didn't write that article for the employees of Haggen Food and Pharmacy, I wrote it for the members of our church. But apparently the Holy Spirit wanted it somewhere else as well. I believe being a witness means being awake every day to God's presence within and around us, and to share that reality. Being a witness means loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, it means reaching out in compassion to those who suffer, including those who have been excluded. I believe we are being a witness with our Reconciling in Christ status as a church that welcomes and affirms all people, including the LGBTQplus community. That's a witness to the inclusiveness of Jesus' ministry.

And for the rest of Acts, we will see the disciples telling everybody this good news: Cornelius, a member of the Roman military, wants to become a follower of Jesus. A eunuch from Ethiopia, a sexual minority, is hungry for God, and is baptized. A wealthy businesswoman in Philippi hears the good news and is baptized.

Jesus says, You will be my witnesses. Go and live out the reign of God. And don't worry. We've got the Spirit to help us. Amen.