

Sermon for May 13, 2018 – “Witnesses”

Ascension Sunday, Year B – Text(s): Luke 24:44-53

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The great celebration is coming to an end. For the last six Sundays we've been celebrating the resurrection, celebrating Easter. We have witnessed the empty tomb, seen the wounds of Jesus with Thomas, and walked to Emmaus with the two disciples. All of this and everything from the angels who announced Christ's birth to His ministry and teaching, to His trial, crucifixion and resurrection. All of this has been preparation for the disciples; preparation for Jesus to leave them behind. As Jesus speaks to His followers today they're not quite sure what they're seeing. For them, it's still the first day of the resurrection, Easter Sunday. They've heard two of their brothers tell the story of how Jesus walked with them on the road to Emmaus but now when Jesus himself shows up they're uncertain if He's a ghost. Jesus offers to let them touch Him to prove that He's real and He eats some fish to show that He is alive. Yet, up until now the disciples had been packing themselves up and getting ready to leave.

They had followed Jesus around for years, three in all, dutifully supporting Him as He went about this ministry. Yet, in the last few days everything had come crashing apart. Jesus was arrested, put on trial, and then executed like a common criminal. After that disaster there was nothing left for them. Their hopes for a messiah had been crushed. The excitement of following a popular preacher and healer had been replaced by disappointment, shock, and grief. For the disciples, the story was over. There was nothing else to stay for. Packing it all up and heading home is natural for us. When things don't go the way we expect we're good at moving on. A relationship doesn't work out, move on to the next. An employment prospect doesn't work out, we find another. A loved one becomes ill and dies, we push away the grief and try to pretend that everything is fine. Everything inside us tell us to avoid the pain, avoid the conflict, avoid the shame. And so we do, or at least, we try. In any case, packing ourselves away is simply self-protection. Withdrawing from life is simply a defense mechanism, one meant to keep us safe from harm.

As we re-connect with one another here each week, as we're fed through Word and Sacrament recharging our spiritual batteries as it were, it seems like a simple matter to live the Christian life. Simple, that is, until Monday morning arrives and everything that felt so empowering seems so far away. The disciples must have felt the same way. Jesus is dead and gone. The reason for sticking around has been taken away. The hope that they had in this little community has been ripped away from them. And then Jesus shows up again. Jesus shows them that He is alive again. Jesus reminds them of who they are and what they've become. “You are witnesses of these things,” He says. Jesus' words spark something in the disciples. He isn't there to hold their hands or to lead them around Galilee and Judea. Jesus isn't the **witness**. Jesus is the **story**.

The Old Testament, Moses, and the Prophets, the Psalms, they were all about Jesus. You see, God's been preparing His people for the Messiah for a long time. The disciple's own experiences of the previous week, the trial, crucifixion, death and now the appearance of the resurrected Christ, this is how Jesus has been preparing His followers. While they've packed themselves up, Jesus has done the opposite. He's **unpacked**, opened up, changed them.

Jesus takes all that they've learned and all that they've experienced and places it in front of them once more. First, Jesus opens their minds to understand the Scriptures then He says to them: "You are witnesses of these things..." because that's what they are! It's what they've been for nearly three years. You are witnesses of God's work in the world. Witnesses of the Messiah come to save. Witnesses of death being turned into life. The disciples have learned the story and now it's their turn to tell it!

Today, Jesus names us witnesses too. Jesus gives us a story to tell also. Like the disciples we've heard the scriptures. We've been prepared for the coming of Messiah. We've experienced the life, death and resurrection of Christ. And in those things, something truly amazing has happened, because in those things Jesus has opened us up and unpacked us. Jesus has washed us and fed us. Jesus has prepared us to stay. Jesus gives us a story to tell by making us a **part** of the story doing so through our Baptism. In the waters of baptism, we also die and rise with Christ anew. In baptism is where we all begin as witnesses, witness to the God who knows and loves us all. In Baptism, Christ makes **his** story (history!) our story. We're not only witnesses to Christ. We've become part of Christ's body, Christ's community, where there only **seems** to be death, and where all we want to do is to pack up and move on. Christ appears showing us new life. Christ turns us from packed up to unpacked, from dead to alive.

As we move to the end of this great season of Easter to the end of this long celebration of the resurrection, God is preparing us. Not to be alone, but to be tellers of the story. God names us as witnesses, unpacking within us the good news given and shared for all. We've learned the story and now it's our turn to tell it. We are witnesses of these things!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.