

Sunday, April 14, 2024
I John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36-48
“Living Witnesses”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

How many of you have ever seen a ghost? Do you believe in ghosts? I have a friend who claims that she can feel the presence of certain spirits at times. I never really believed her, until I stayed in her home - hearing doors open and close in rooms no one was in, hearing footsteps long after everyone was asleep, lights going on and off, and then in the room I was staying, in the middle of the night, the closet door slowly opened and a cool breeze blew across my face – just an old house - I’m not so sure anymore!

In the time of Jesus, many did believe in ghosts or what they referred to as “disembodied spirits”, but usually when a ghost or spirit appeared, it was not a good thing, it usually meant something was very wrong. Maybe that is why when the angels appeared to people like Mary, Zechariah, the shepherds and others, their first words were, “Do not be afraid; [calm down] I have come to bring you good news.”

So, it’s still Easter Sunday! Today’s story is the second resurrection appearance in the Gospel of Luke, with both appearances taking place on the actual day of the resurrection. In the first appearance, last Sunday, Jesus was with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The disciples fail to recognize him, Jesus scolds them for not believing – so Jesus instructs them from scripture, shares bread with them, their eyes are opened, and Jesus suddenly disappears.

In this second appearance, today’s reading, the disciples are all gathered in one room, talking, and Jesus appears again. Recall, Jesus didn’t come knocking at the door – he just suddenly appeared among them. Even though he had said he would be raised from the dead, even though there had been a report by the women of the empty tomb and the angels told them he had risen, and this was confirmed by Peter; even though they had a report by two disciples from Emmaus and the ones gathered there for a meal that they had seen Jesus, they still were not prepared to have Jesus just appear. Do we blame them for being startled and a bit terrified? We don’t know what he looked like. Do we blame them for thinking he was a ghost, and maybe not a friendly one?

Like in the Gospel of John - you know the one with doubting Thomas - it is no wonder the first words Jesus spoke was “peace be with you” [calm down, it’s me]. But unlike John’s gospel where their fear stems from being afraid the authorities would come after them and they would be killed, fear here is because -- poof -- Jesus is just there! And like last week, “doubt” is being used here to simplify something a little more complex – trying to figure out how someone rises from the dead. How is that even possible? And that is why Luke writes, “while in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering.”

Now I have always liked the word doubt because I have always thought that wondering or doubt, isn’t the opposite of faith but is actually a necessary part of faith. Because, faith is trust in spite of a lack of evidence. Right?! Faith is acting as if something is true even when you don’t have a lot of proof that it is. So its okay to doubt. As one pastor writes, “because, honestly, in light of all the death and trauma and disappointment and tragedy that colors every human life, if you don’t have at least

some difficulty believing the promise that God not only raised one person, Jesus from the dead, but also promises new life and second chances and forgiveness and grace to all, then you're probably not paying attention." (1)

The resurrection story was first revealed to those who were doubtful, fearful, those who were in great pain, wondering what they heard and seen and felt. To prove that he was not a ghost, Jesus tells the disciples, "Look at my hands and feet, I am flesh and bones, touch me. Give me something to eat. Do ghosts eat?" It's not that they are refusing to believe, they just had some more things to figure out. As one writes, think about that, how often have you and I encountered God's Easter power, been overwhelmed in gratitude or joy but then began to wonder and question its realness? Maybe it wasn't a miracle, maybe that wasn't God at work in some extraordinary way, maybe I'm making a bigger deal out of this than is warranted. And that's how this experience is different from Thomas, His response is an immediate "My Lord and my God!" (2) These disciples have joy but also some questions. Don't we all.

Jesus then tells the disciples of God's plan to restore all of creation, from the covenant with Abraham to the exodus from Egypt, from Ezekiel's valley of dry bones to Isaiah's suffering servant. They have heard all this before but not in this light. You see, the Emmaus travelers listened as the then-unknown Jesus explained the scriptures, then had it all click into place as he made himself known to them in the breaking of the bread. Here, the disciples witness Jesus eat the fish – oh loaves and fishes – everything has a hidden meaning – he eats the fish and then Jesus reminds them of what the Scriptures said would happen. And he doesn't just remind them of what the scriptures say about him but what they say about them, the disciples. Jesus then commissions them to proclaim to all nations repentance and forgiveness, saying "you are now witnesses of these things." You are.

As one pastor writes, notice Jesus doesn't say, "you will be witnesses, please be witnesses, consider being a witness if you have time." He says, "you are witnesses of these things." Sorry, no choice, you saw it, you have to speak about it. And that's us too. We are witnesses to all of this and it doesn't depend on our readiness or belief, or acceptance. Left up to our own devices we'd make up every excuse imaginable to relinquish such responsibility. We'd convince ourselves that more qualifications could more certainly justify this calling. But guess what, we don't have a choice - the disciples didn't – we don't.

She continues, "So rather than continue in our ceaseless attempts to convince ourselves we have a choice, that we can carry out this occupation just as soon as we are adequately prepared, that we can graciously, even politely and respectfully, [avoid] God's claim on us, why not try it on and see what it feels like? Fake it till you make it, if you will. Who knows. Maybe then we might start to believe it. Because witnessing is not optional. It's not an intermittent activity of faith. It's not something you can decide to do one day and then resolve to take the next day off. It's constant. It's a way of life. It's who you are. And it's time, more than time when it's post-resurrection time, to get used to it." (3)

A witness is one who testifies to what they saw, what they feel, what they believe. John's letter, the first Epistle he wrote is all about the fact that we have been given so

much love from God that we are called God's children, beloved, loved, no matter what. Witness to that! Because if you claim to be a child of God, you are then a witness and must live a life of integrity that is not separated from God, but in the love of God. John states, through our baptism we have become followers of Christ, we belong to a community, we are children of the living God, and that means we are to try, try to live a virtuous, ethical life, emulating the essential goodness of God. And when we stray, which we all do, when we separate ourselves from God and one another, in other words, when we sin, Christ will defend us, for Christ died for us, Christ was raised in power for us.

So here we are some 2,000 years later, we too have Easter joy but also disbelieving, doubts, wondering, and many questions. If Jesus does in fact appear and disappear, but also has a real body and eats real food, pronounces peace and produces the holy spirit. If all this is true, then why is the world still such a mess? The good news we have is Jesus continues to show up behind the locked doors of our hearts. To show us forgiveness, healing and peace. So if a bodily resurrection isn't enough to get us out there preaching, what are we waiting for? What more do we need? What are we afraid of? And when we don't speak, invite, come and see, our inaction also testifies – our words and deeds, or lack of them, give witness to what we believe or don't believe.

As I said last week, I've been doing a lot of reading lately, especially about churches. As one author states, "In one sense, we are watching in real time the same market forces that closed Main Street, work their havoc on the local neighborhood congregations. Large program-driven and attractional churches can offer age-specific programming, high energy contemporary worship and a variety of niche religious products, consolidating churchgoers in the process. To put it in economic terms, with the rise of the "Nones" n-o-n-e-s [those raised with no church experience] [with more and more non-churched folks out there], congregations can only claw at the edges of a diminishing religious market."

But before we wring our hands and give up, we must realize that people aren't just leaving the church. "They are wandering from institutional and public life in general. Since the 1950s, rates of voluntarism have dropped off a cliff, leaving neighborhood associations and community service organizations scrambling for help. Once trusted institutions are now viewed with skepticism. And many people out there are lonely, dangerously so, caught in a vicious cycle driven by disconnection and despair." But, But! This church is uniquely situated not in a neighborhood of decline but in a spot by itself which is highly visible.

As that author states, "An abundant community is a community that has become aware of the gifts and wisdom of its people, and it is a community that takes responsibility for shared well-being." Folks, we have a lot to witness about here, to offer. Because we can and do offer what he calls "a steady rhythm of presence, a baseline of care and attention humming underneath whatever else happens" out there. (4) Because I also read that churches like this one, can be reborn, if we reawaken to the gifts we possess and make them come alive. Like the crafters and the quilters, the singers and the ringers, the builders and the painters, the teachers and the readers, the cooks and the servers, the ushers and the greeters, I could go on and on. We have so

many different gifts here but I think there is one we need to enhance and cultivate a little more, communicate a lot more. And that is our spiritual gifts, the gift of being spiritual people.

You see, those folks out there – the None’s, the ones who distrust organized religion, most are spiritual but not religious. They practice yoga, meditation and other spiritual practices, they have faith, deep faith, but don’t know or trust what we have going on in here. I also read an article this week, actually written by a friend, who talks about the fact that most of us Christians have a limited scope for the spiritual part of our lives, the mystical, the mystery of the Holy Spirit present. He was on a panel discussion called “Spiritual and religious: bridging Mystical Experience and Christianity”. He states, “I find it troubling that our churches aren’t safe places for people to share their profound spiritual experiences. After all, our faith is built on these mystical encounters.” Think of today’s story.

We must be willing to share our gifts and our spiritual experiences. Call them what you want, God-coincidences, God-moments, near-death experiences, transformational miracles, spiritual reawakening’s, they are a huge part of faith. Just as doubt is, mystery is. I recall going to a silent dinner, picture this - 20 women gathered for a meal who couldn’t say a word for a full hour – so hard at first! But then you really notice your senses, the smells, the sounds, the lights, the expressions on each other’s faces, it was beautiful and mystical. Many of us share seeing a bird or a butterfly over and over after a loved one dies, I had a robin slam into our family room window right after I heard my mother had died, but it slammed into the window 3 times – what was that? I see a robin outside my window almost every morning. Mom? We don’t know and we need to make this a safe space to at least explore that unknown spirit, that wonder, the mystery and miracle of God in everyday life.

This is what it means to have an awareness of the spirit and an openness to God. He goes on, “our churches can grow when we become safe places to nurture and share God’s experiences. For that to happen, we must commit to embracing, studying and cultivating a dynamic and varied connection to God. (5) You interested? Let me know.

When you leave this place, it is my hope that you leave with more than just a good feeling, it is my hope that you will begin to feel at peace, and realize that you are the resurrected children of God, free to live and love and witness to others. To be a living witness today is not to simply repeat what you have seen and heard. It is to give your whole life as evidence of the truth. We are witnesses when we live in a way that defies any explanation other than the presence of the risen Christ within us and feel we have no choice but to testify to these things. May it be so. Amen.

1) Lose, The Rev. David. Resurrection Doubts. 4/13/2015)

2) Harmon, The Rev. Chelsey. Center for Excellence in Preaching, 4/14/2024.

(3) Lewis, The Rev. Karoline. Working Preacher. 4/9/2018.)

(4) Hagley, Dr. Scott. “In Defense of the Common Congregation”. The Presbyterian Outlook. 2/2024

(5) Standish, The Rev. Graham. “Embracing Mysticism, near-death experiences and spiritual encounters at church”. The Presbyterian Outlook. 4/10/2024