

Called to Witness
First Reading: Luke 24:13-16, 28-35
Second Reading: Luke 24:36-48
April 15, 2018 – Third Sunday of Easter

Last week we heard John's story of the resurrection. We heard how Jesus suddenly appeared to the disciples in a locked room. Last week I preached about the spiritual presence of the risen Christ. But this week our Gospel lesson focuses on Luke's story of resurrection; and Luke informs us that the risen Christ is far more than just a spiritual force. Here we read that Jesus appeared to two disciples, Cleopas and an unnamed disciple, while they were on the road to Emmaus.

On Easter Sunday, we learned about a certain unnamed young man of Mark's Gospel who would announce the resurrection to the women; and I suggested that the young man might be you or I – called to announce the resurrection. I also suggested that the "disciple whom Jesus loved" in John's gospel might serve the same purpose. And here, in Luke, I suggest that the unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus could be any one of us, walking the road with Jesus.

And Jesus appeared on the road, as real as any traveler along the road to Emmaus might be. He struck up a conversation with the two. He "made friends" with the two, such that they invited him to stay for dinner. When he sat down at the table with them, he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. That sequence should sound familiar to all of you: "He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it." It's the Communion formula. And suddenly. . . Suddenly, the disciples recognized him in the breaking of the bread. How often have I suggested that we should see the love of God, we should see the risen Christ in every piece of communion bread and in every cup of wine?

And so, the two disciples immediately returned to Jerusalem, found the eleven and their companions and announced: "We have seen the Lord. He is risen indeed!" And this brings us to our second lesson for today; and this also seems to echo John's Gospel, for we're told that, while the disciples were meeting, Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you!"; and the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost.

But whatever this presence was, it was more than just a spiritual presence. Remember, last week, we considered Paul's writing which says that Jesus was raised a "Spiritual Body," but the Greek word for "body," *soma*, refers to flesh and blood – NOT simply a spiritual presence. So here Luke reports that Jesus invites the disciples to touch him, to verify that he has flesh and bone; and he eats a piece of fish in front of them to verify his bodily presence.

Friends, I don't know what the physical form of the resurrected Jesus was during those forty days from his resurrection to his ascension. It seems that he had a physical body – real flesh and blood; and, at the same time, it seems that he was a spiritual presence that could appear in the right place at the right time: to two travelers on the road, to a crying woman at the tomb, to disciples behind locked doors. I once had a theology professor who would tell her class, “To declare a part of Christian doctrine a mystery is a ‘cop-out.’” I certainly know where she was coming from; for, if we were to declare all of theology a mystery, we would have no theology. But, I think I need to declare the bodily appearance of the risen Christ a mystery. Still, truthfully, the exact nature of the body is not important.

What is important is that there was a resurrection, a wonderful, miraculous, uniquely special event; and what's more important is the promise that even after the ascension, which we'll be celebrating in a few weeks, the spirit of the risen Christ remains with us; and will remain with us always.

What's really important in this long passage about the resurrected Christ is the last three verses. Hear them again, this time from the Common English Bible translation:

This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:46-48)

“A change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name *to all nations*.” It was Palm Sunday, that I spoke of Jesus' declaration, “My house shall be a house of prayer *for all nations*.” I've said it a hundred times before – if Jesus was about anything he was about inclusiveness. Jesus came for all nations, for all people. Jesus died for all people. Jesus rose for all people. And Jesus calls all people to a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins. What would the world be like if all people could both ask for forgiveness and extend forgiveness to all other people?

Every Sunday in this church, as part of the pastoral prayer, we pray for peace. We pray for peace in our nation and in our world; and we also pray for peace in our hearts. I recognize that we, as individuals, are limited in our ability to affect peace in the nation and/or in the world. Note: I said limited; I did not say helpless. I am absolutely thrilled to see the youth of this country taking up the cause of gun control. Most of you know I'm a strong proponent of stricter gun control. Some of you don't agree with my stand on gun control; and that's okay. I'm also a strong proponent of free speech and free thinking in a democratic society. But I'm thrilled that the students of this country have rallied to say

enough is enough. I'm deeply saddened that so many of our young people had to die to bring about such action. But teenagers, young people have taken to the streets, taken to social media, taken to the newspapers, radio, and television, and marched on Washington in the name of peace. My prayers are with those young people and with every person who works for peace.

But, as we pray for peace in our communities, in our nation, in our world, and in our schools, we also pray for peace in our hearts; and we have total control of the peace in our hearts. Many of us have a need for change of heart and life for forgiveness. Many of us have a need to let go of some old "baggage" we've been dragging around. It is Christ's call to turn away from that "baggage" and to turn toward Christ. And then there is the other side of forgiveness, the need that many of us have to forgive others, to let go of some long harbored resentment or hurt that is literally eating at our soul. Christ calls us to preach forgiveness to all people; and Christ calls us to live forgiveness each and every day.

(As an aside, last week I spoke about the Daniel Plan which we will be instituting at our church starting a week from Saturday. The Daniel Plan concentrates on five essentials of a healthy life: Faith, Food, Fitness, Focus, and Friends. That "change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins," that would be Focus. Focus is all about freeing oneself of negative emotions. More details on the Daniel Plan are in your bulletin.)

This brings me to the last statement in today's lesson: "You are witnesses of these things." Each and every one of us is called to "witness." Jesus did not intend for our faith to be a private thing. No, I'm not suggesting that you stand on a street corner shouting about repentance, but I'm also not suggesting that we hide our light under a bushel. I've said it before, and I say it again – the news of God's amazing love is too good to keep it to ourselves.

I've said it before – there are good things happening in here. We need to do a better job of letting the folks out there know the good things that are happening in here. We need to do a better job of inviting the folks out there in here. "Our Faithful Journey," our long range plan is majorly working on that; but I hope each and every one of you are also asking yourselves how you can be a part of spreading the Good News.

It's to this that Jesus calls us. He says: "You are witnesses of these things." The Gospel of Luke was not written for the disciples. The Gospel of Luke was written at least forty years after Jesus died. The Gospel of Luke was written for you and for me. We are the witnesses. We are the ones who have been called to testify to the forgiveness, to the mercy, to the peace and to the love of the risen Christ. The Book of Hebrews says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1-2a)

May it be so. May it be so.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy God,
Help us lay aside the weight, the sins that bog us down.
Help us to bear witness to the mercy, the love and the peace of Christ,
as we look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.
This we pray in his holy name.
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
North Olmsted United Methodist Church