

Acts 3: 12-19

Psalm 4

I John 3: 1-7

St. Luke 24: 36b-48

Third Sunday of Easter Season 2024.

“You are witnesses of these things.”

St. Luke 24: 48

Disaster movies often have the same kind of sequence: We meet the characters; then there's a sense of growing foreboding, and a huge crisis or incident... A short time later, as the dust is settling, the muscular heroes with torn clothes look at each other, exhausted and sprawled among the debris. They say to each other, “Now what?...” What do we do now?...

How to respond after a crisis isn't just a topic for disaster movies. It also happens in real life... For example, an airplane carrying 182 passengers took off from Djakarta, Indonesia, on February 16, 2019. The plane encountered a violent rainstorm, while landing at a nearby regional air traffic hub. A passenger recorded the incident on his phone... At first it seems as if the plane has landed safely... But a few seconds later, the plane skidded off the runway, and passengers had to be rescued. (No one was hurt.) That's the crisis... Let's notice what happens a few minutes later, after the passengers are taken to the airline terminal... Do we notice what one passenger is doing in the background, after the crisis is over? He's kissing the ground. He's so relieved!... That's what he does in *response*, after the crisis. Many of us are probably sympathetic to how he felt...

In the Christian story, the big event is the betrayal, torture and murder of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifixion – and the resurrection that emerges from that event... The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the stunning transformation in the history of the world. The Christian calendar observes dates of “B.C.” (before Christ) and “A.D.” (*Annus Domini*, in the year of the Lord). Jesus Christ is understood to be the turning point in the history of the world...

Jesus Christ's death and resurrection is the critical event, the theological lynch-pin, for the salvation of the world... But, *then what?*... It seems that the first followers of Jesus didn't quite know what to do, in light of the recent stunning events...

Looking back in history from our perspective, some 2000 years later, we might want to reassure those first disciples: “It's all right! All this means that the power of death is defeated. Just wait a little bit, and pray, and you'll be given the Holy Spirit. The outcome is really wonderful!...” We see it from *our* perspective. But none of the first disciples knew all this, in those first days after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus... They are still facing the fact that they had betrayed and abandoned their Lord in his hour of great need... They were still trying to understand that God's intention for the Messiah, the Christ, was very different from the political liberation from the Roman Empire...

At this time in history, the apostles and others were trying to make sense of the bizarre reports, of blessed Jesus being alive *after* his death... How could this possibly be?...

Lots has changed in the last 2000 years or so – but human nature hasn't changed... There are times when we can be equally confused by events in life. Our times of confusion and bewilderment are never on this scale (it's true), but we have all faced times when we felt abandoned; or, when we realized we've let down people we love in a terrible way... We may be confused and trying to sort it all out... We may be trying to make sense of how the living God is at work, in the strange situation in which we find ourselves... What comes next, in light of all that's happened?...

St. Luke the Evangelist records the situation with his typical clarity and care: Guess who shows up?... Yes; it's the risen Lord Jesus himself, in all his wounded beauty and glorious radiance... The risen Jesus Christ appears before the bewildered apostles...

Jesus' first priority is to unfold the scriptures to his stunned listeners. The New Testament has not yet been written, of course. But Jesus Christ upheld the authority and the relevance of the ancient scriptures to reveal God's work through history, culminating in his very self!...

Can we imagine being at the feet of the Lord Jesus ourselves, listening with wonder as all the passages we know so well, yet often find confusing, are shared and spoken with such clarity, so that confusion melts into wondrous insight?... Wouldn't it have been amazing, to have sat at the feet of the Lord, on that spring evening in Palestine?...

We read next that the risen Jesus Christ changes his focus, from talking about his fulfilment of Israel's history, to explaining what his followers are to do *now*... In effect, he is answering the question, "What do we do now?..."

In the Old Testament scriptures, there was a growing sense that God was about to do a new thing – a new transformation of his people... For example, Isaiah 65: 17 reads, "For I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth."

After the prophet Ezekiel has a vision of a great army of people coming back to life, Ezekiel 37: 13-14 reads: "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

The prophet Joel prophesies of a time when God's Spirit will come on "all flesh" – that is, "all people..." This future promise of God is not just for one nation (surprisingly, to the Jewish readers), but all people... So, there is this growing sense among the people of faith – of some kind of new beginning, a new spiritual encounter...

Remember the perfect, intimate relationship which the Lord Jesus had with his heavenly Father? In today's passage, the Lord Jesus tells the bewildered disciples that there is a coming "promise of the Father..." The "promise of the Father..."

St. Luke records it again in Acts 1: 4: "While staying with them, [Jesus] ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father." There it is again – "the promise of the Father..." That promise was finally fulfilled by the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and beyond...

So, here is the Lord Jesus, patiently speaking with his bewildered followers, a very short time after his resurrection. Even now he's preparing them for the "promise of the Father" – the coming of God's Spirit into their hearts, when they will be clothed with God's power...

What comes next, after the resurrection of Jesus Christ? There is the promise of the Father – the gift of the Holy Spirit...

In light of this, all Christ's followers are supposed to do something: – they are to be "witnesses of these things..." What comes next? They are to be "witnesses..." And so are you and I...

So, Jesus' death and resurrection occur. After that, you and I are supposed to be witnesses... What does this mean, that every Christ-follower (including you and I) is to be a witness?... In court, a witness is expected simply to report the facts truthfully of what he or she has observed or experienced. In the same way, as we are followers of the Lord Jesus in *our* generation, the first instruction which we are given here by the Lord Jesus himself is that you and I are to tell the truth to others, of what we have observed and experienced. You and I are expected to share the gospel – the good news...

We are to be witnesses in a couple of ways: First, we are to be witnesses by what we *do*, and what we don't do... We are called to a higher moral standard than the world around us. We are to love our enemies – even the most irritating or obnoxious ones. In the ancient world, the followers of Jesus astonished the culture around them by their steadfast devotion to Jesus; they refused to worship the idols of the Roman state (often at great personal cost); they sought to live lives of sexual chastity and moral integrity within a wider promiscuous urban Roman culture... Our modern day health care system, and our education system, have their roots in the Christian community caring for the sick, and aiming to provide free education to every single person... To take yet another example from Christian history, it was evangelical Anglicans who were key figures to work for the eradication of slavery in Britain and eventually, through the Commonwealth... The steadfast witness and humble Christian service continues today, all around the globe. So, one of the ways we are witnesses of the gospel is seen in the sin we give up, and the good works we choose to take on.

“Put to death what is earthly in you,” Paul writes; also, “For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life...” (Colossians 3: 5; Ephesians 2:8, *etc.*)

Second, our witness to Jesus Christ is also shown in what we say – and how we say it!... We live in the midst of a deeply troubled and broken world. We’re called to speak out clearly of the difference Jesus Christ can make in our lives... Being a witness in our speech does not mean that we are preaching at people. It does not mean that we suggest we are superior to others (because we aren’t). We don’t use our speech to judge or to condemn... Positively, we share wonderful news of Christ’s forgiveness, mercy and life, to inquirers, and to the broken... We can encourage. We can invite. We can challenge. “So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits,” reads James 3: 5...

Just as God has given us hands and feet, he has also given us tongues... In light of Christ’s resurrection, Christians are called to be witnesses, in speech and in action...

We note that none of this is by our own power alone. God is not only present within the Church. God is present in the world. His Spirit is calling people home, softening and preparing hearts to receive him. God is giving us his grace, to live for him day by day, and to have the courage to reach out – to speak and to offer. God won’t do it all *for* us; but, he will help us, every step of the way...

The great Christian event is Christ’s death and resurrection? What next? There is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then we and all the faithful are called to witness to Jesus Christ, both in speech and in deeds.

Glory be to the risen Christ!
Amen.