

We Bear Witness

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Luke 24:36-48 (Common English Bible) ³⁶ While they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ³⁷ They were terrified and afraid. They thought they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It's really me! Touch me and see, for a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones like you see I have." ⁴⁰ As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ Because they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, he said to them, "Do you have anything to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of baked fish. ⁴³ Taking it, he ate it in front of them. ⁴⁴ Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. ⁴⁶ He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

We use the word witness in two ways.

A witness can be an observer. You might witness a couple being joined in marriage, or you might witness a fender-bender.

A witness can also mean proof of something, evidence of reality. Your presence in this moment is witness that we can worship beyond the walls of a church building.

I was thinking about the word witness in relation to Christ's resurrection. There's no scriptural evidence that there were any witnesses to the moment of Christ's resurrection. And yet, the result of the Easter miracle is that we who entrust our lives to God through faith in Jesus Christ have been made witnesses. The thoughts we contemplate, the words we utter, the lives we lead *bear witness* to God's power to change hearts and lives.

Let me share two stories that witness to the power of God to change lives. A minister friend related the story of Terry.¹ It's been probably twenty-five years since the day Terry showed up at the front door of a Presbyterian church in downtown Atlanta. When the receptionist buzzed him into the lobby and asked, "May I help you?" Terry said, "I hope so. I want to get clean. I hear you have a program here to help people out of drugs."

Soon Terry was sitting in the office of a man who the church hires to help those in the community who need social services. "I'm very sorry," the church employee said, "but we have no more funds this month to put you in the detox program. But I'll help you until the end of the month, and if you stick with me until then, I promise you the first money we receive then will be for you."

Three years later, Terry was sitting in a new members' class at the church. The prospective members were each sharing what it was that brought them to that church. One said, "I'm here because I love the music program." Others said, "We've heard great things about the youth group" or "I like the outreach programs. Then it was Terry's turn. "I'm here because this church saved me."

Wow. Some come to a church because of ample parking or a concert series. He came for the salvation.

¹ This story is adapted — and sometimes taken word-for-word — from a sermon "Healing, then Serving" by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Boyte Peters (now Kelly Peters Brill) at Avon Lake United Church of Christ in Avon Lake, Ohio on February 5, 2006.

A few months later, some of those fellow new members noticed Terry's name on the prayer list, followed by the word "incarcerated." You might have expected that Terry had experienced a relapse. The minister visited Terry in the county jail.

"What are you doing here?" the pastor asked.

"Well, I knew there was an old warrant out for my arrest. After sitting in church a while and listening to the sermons and reading the Bible, I decided God wanted me to turn myself in. And it's been great."

"Great? How do you mean?"

Terry said, "Well, there are a lot of people in here who need someone to talk to, people who need to believe that they can change, that they can turn their lives around. There are people here who need to be prayed with, people who need to hear about God."

The pastor nodded. "How long will you be in here?"

Terry's face lit up with a huge grin. "I'll be out in time for Easter, and I can't wait to be in church on Easter Sunday."

Terry's life bore witness to God's power to change hearts and lives.

In 2 Corinthians Chapter 3, the apostle Paul reminded the Christians there that they themselves bore witness to God's power to change lives. It wasn't just what they *said* they believed. It was who they were: embracing an outlook of hope; embodying a loving spirit of fellowship; disregarding their privileged positions in order to take on the role of helper; joyfully making sacrificial gifts in order to meet the needs of others. Paul said the Christians there functioned for him as "letters of introduction." He didn't need anyone to vouch for the truth of his message because the Corinthian Christians themselves bore witness to the power of the gospel to change lives.

Sometimes even ministers can bear witness. Fred Craddock was a pastor and seminary professor known for his down-home storytelling from his many years growing up and later serving churches in Tennessee and Oklahoma. He and his wife Nettie were on a vacation back in Gatlinburg when they stopped in a new restaurant reputed to have good food and a great view of the Great Smoky Mountains. Here's how Dr. Craddock tells the story:

Early in the meal an elderly man approached our table and said, "Good evening." I said, "Good evening."

He said, "Are you on vacation?"

I said, "Yes," but under my breath I was saying, *It's really none of your business.*

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"We're from Oklahoma."

"What do you do in Oklahoma?"

Under my breath but almost audible, I was saying, *Leave us alone. We're on vacation, and we don't know who you are.* I said, "I am a Christian minister."

He said, "What church?"

I said, "The [Disciples of Christ]."

He paused a moment and said, "I owe a great deal to a minister of the [Disciples of Christ] church," and he pulled out a chair and sat down.

I said, "Yes, have a seat." I tried to make it seem like I sincerely meant it, but I didn't. *Who is this person?*

He said, "I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days that was a shame, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on her, of course, fell also on me. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who was my father. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess, and ate my lunch alone.

“In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Springs Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don’t know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome since I was, as they put it, [illegitimate]. So I would go just in time for the sermon, and when it was over I would move out because I was afraid that someone would say, ‘What’s a boy like you doing in a church?’

“One Sunday some people queued up in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was that minister. I [looked up past my shoulder] and caught a glimpse of his beard and his chin, and I knew who it was. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and seemed to be staring for a little while. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was. A moment later he said, ‘Well, boy, you’re a child...’ and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, ‘Boy, you’re a child of God. I see a striking resemblance, boy.’ Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, ‘Now, you go claim your inheritance.’ I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life.”

I was so moved by the story I had to ask him, “What’s your name?”

He said, “Ben Hooper.”

[Dr. Craddock ends the story by saying] I recalled, though vaguely, my own father talking when I was just a child about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor a man who had no father, a man named Ben Hooper.²

In speaking those words of unconditional acceptance to that boy who had been saddled with the burden of fatherlessness, that minister bore witness to the power of the gospel to change a life.

When Jesus sent his disciples out on their first mission trip, they were to invite people to change their hearts and lives. It was not only their words that mattered. By their lives the disciples bore witness to the life-changing power that comes from trusting in God to lead.

Luke’s gospel told us that the Risen Christ said to his followers, “A change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in [my] name to all nations,” and added, “You are witnesses.”

We are witnesses. Our actions and attitudes and words bear witness to our faith in God who has power over all powers – even death. We bear witness to the faithfulness of God whose love for us and all creation is so great that God chose to live among us in Jesus Christ our Savior and Guide. Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God!

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² Fred B. Craddock, ed. By Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward. Craddock Stories. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001, p. 156.