

Witnesses to the Resurrection

“If only I had been there when Jesus surprised his disciples after the cross,” we say, “because that would be the



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ultimate motivation to change the world.”

Let’s think about that. Were those first Christians confident in every situation, able to brush aside every challenge, untroubled by rejection and opposition, and victorious every day? According to the biblical record ... no! Luke, the sole Gentile writer of the Jesus story, reveals that the first disciples, those who knew the inside story and were familiar with the hope of God’s Messiah, had trouble understanding Jesus along with uncertainty about his resurrection.

Those first days after the cross and burial were confusing. Even though Jesus explained he would die and come back, the disciples had trouble making that idea mesh with the conflicting images of the cross and the return of a deliverer like King David. Cultural differences aside, we all know what victory looks like: the bad guys are thrown out, the good guys get the rewards, and right triumphs. So, let’s line up for those golden streets and celebrations.

What do you do when the sun comes up and the world is still falling apart? When your grief hasn’t gone away, and daily challenges get only bigger? That’s the disciples’ world in Jerusalem after Jesus was buried. We have four gospels that depict the aftermath of the cross and all four show disciples grieving, confused and wondering what comes next. It’s a fascinating read, watching scenes of the women coming to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body, the disciples on the road to Emmaus when the risen Christ joined them and opened their eyes, or the disciples gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem when Jesus showed up and said to “doubting” Thomas, “If it will help, why don’t you touch my wounds?” (John 20:26-31).

Today’s text presents both the physical reality and spiritual reality of Jesus’ resurrection. The disciples are huddled in Jerusalem, talking about the many stories of people seeing the resurrected Jesus, when, suddenly he appears! He greets them, “Peace be with you.” (Lk. 24:36) The reaction is not joy but fear – Is this a ghost?

“Why are you so afraid and filled with doubt? Look at my wounds and touch me. You think I’m a ghost, but a ghost does not have flesh and bones. Do you have anything to eat? They gave him a bite of broiled fish and he ate it to their amazement!” (vv. 38-45). It would be interesting if we could actually see those disciples’ minds at work, ideas clashing with stories already heard and now the undeniable physical evidence.

Now Jesus has their attention, with a major barrier of fear and grief dislodged. Jesus turns their hearts and minds to the truth that “everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” This reflects the threefold segments of Jewish scriptures: the law, the prophets, and the writings. In other words, all the holy books testify to Jesus as Messiah. Luke, the Gentile, reveals his deep understanding of who Jesus is with the words “he opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (v. 43). The phrase presents two key ideas: 1) Jesus has a deeper understanding of God’s redemption beyond traditional thinking, and 2) they are witnessing the truth that God has intended his redemption for all humanity from the beginning of creation.

What must they (we) understand? “That the Messiah is to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (vv. 46-47). This will prove a difficult concept in the earliest days of the church. Jerusalem is not the fountainhead of God’s grace, heaven is, and the cross is the brutal evidence

of this truth. This is not the dismissal of the Jewish saga or rejection of the importance of the law or the temple. But these are the progressive revelations of God’s grace culminating in the cross and resurrection. At this stage it is still difficult to break from established religious practices and traditions to the openness of God’s grace to all the world. But God was about to use those first disciples to break down established barriers and take the good news to everyone.

“You are witnesses of all these things,” Jesus says, “stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (v. 49). Pentecost will soon amaze them all! (Acts 2:1-36). After this life-changing experience, Jesus led his disciples from the confines of Jerusalem to the familiar quiet of nearby Bethany where he blessed them and was “carried up into heaven” (v. 51). The change in those insecure grieving disciples is remarkable: “they worshiped him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God” (vv. 52-53).

Fast-forward 2,000 years and consider how we modern disciples of Jesus are to be “witnesses of these things” (v. 48). Replicating the life of Peter or Paul is not possible for all of us, but doesn’t life place challenges in front of all believers? Following Christ must influence how we relate to people down the block, at school, in church, at work. Every facet of living reveals whose you are: your values, how you manage your resources, your work ethic, your words. A reminder again of Paul’s word mentioned in last week’s lesson: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

New! That means different in the way you think and live. James 2:7 reminds us in a meddlesome way: “Faith, if it has no works is dead, being by itself.” Your witness to the resurrection is the way you live out the love and grace of God every day.