

WORSHIP

Sermon | 4.22.2018



Living Unafraid in a Scary World:

You Shall Be My Witnesses

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Acts 1:6-11

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ ⁷He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

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Before I preach I want to say publically how much I appreciated our worship last Sunday, which was led by our youth. One of the things I have come to love about our church is that people turn out for worship on the Sunday that our youth lead. And that’s not just because many of us *remember them when they were **this** tall*. I think people turn out to worship because we want to learn, and want to hear from some faithful younger people who are already leading us into a changing and hopeful future. So to all our youth, and youth advisors....thank you for a rich experience of worship. We are more than simply grateful. We are better for it.

From now until the first Sunday in June we are going to follow along with those disciples who figured out how to live in a way that showed they trusted Jesus as Lord. If you check the front cover of the bulletin, you will find that today is the “fourth Sunday in Easter.” Easter is more than an event that happened on that morning when the women found Jesus’ tomb empty. Easter is a new way of life – whereby we allow the promises of a God of resurrection to shape our outlook on the world and the future.



Easter begs the question: if we believe God could do that – love us to the point of suffering and death, break the power of sin and death by raising Jesus from the grave, act in such a way and with such grace that the world is saved through him – if we believe God could do that – then what does that mean for us going forward?

The sermon series is called Living Unafraid in a Scary World. Our Scripture reading is from the first chapter of the book of Acts. This is the story of the disciples who are with Jesus in those early days after the first Easter...the last time they would be together before Jesus ascended and gave those disciples work to do. Listen with me for the word of the Lord.

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I want you to imagine that you were standing in that group of disciples around Jesus.

You've already dropped your net.

You've made the decision to follow.

Which means you've given things up...made choices that had a real impact on the future you once imagined you might have...in order to commit your life to Jesus.

Think about you would have seen.

What you would have heard.

The sermons. The parables.

The way Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God – this other vision for the world – where people and things that didn't seem to have much value were all of a sudden worthy – precious – treasured.

The least. The lost. The left out.

They have a place – first place – in the Kingdom of God.

And you would have seen Jesus' power – power to heal, power to raise the dead, power to forgive, power to transform. Miracles – 5,000 fed. Walking on water. Calming the storm. Power – only possible with God.

I want you to imagine you were there to experience all of that.

To see it. To feel it.

And then you thought was gone. Defeated. Killed. You waited three days.

You didn't wait, really. But three days later, you discovered that the power and the promise that Jesus talked about was even more than you had imagined. That is was real – as real as resurrection – which is more real than the world that we see...a world limited and defined by sin and death.



I want you to imagine that you were there – in that group of disciples standing with Jesus. Gathered together in Jerusalem after those things that happened with the cross and the tomb and the stone rolled away and Jesus on the loose.

Someone asked the question that more than one person was thinking: “Jesus - Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

At first blush, that sounds like a question about time – like “what’s the schedule? When can we put ‘restore the kingdom’ on our calendars?”

But I don’t think that’s why the disciples asked the question. I think their question was more – “Jesus...What now?”

I think what was going on was that the disciples had been caught up in their incredible journey – wrapped up in what Jesus had been doing in his ministry and along the way to Jerusalem and the cross. But now that that journey was over – and they had a new perspective on what Jesus did, what he said, what he promised – those disciples...they really believed it – they saw it – they had a renewed trust that the things Jesus talked about really were going to be the future. That the Kingdom of God wasn’t just a dream. That God was that powerful. And faithful. And good.

Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?

It’s not a question about time. The disciples didn’t really ask the question because they were curious. It seems to me they asked it because they were worried.

They didn’t *just* see all the things Jesus did and said – they also lived in a world that crucified Jesus. They looked around and they knew that those things that Jesus talked about – especially the least, the lost, and the left out – well, those problems were not yet solved.

They were still living in a world that gave them reason to worry...reason to fear...and since they had a resurrected Jesus with them they wanted to know –

“is this the time when you will restore Israel?”

Is this the time when you will make things right?

It’s an Easter question, asked by those that follow Jesus who realize that they are still living in the midst of a scary world.

And I get it.

Don’t you?

Haven’t you felt that question?

Certainly you’ve felt the worry. The anxiety. The fear.



Quickly scanning the headlines upon the news of another school shooting – because it could be...you know...personal.

Watching tensions build between countries that possess nuclear weapons – bringing back worries we had consigned to decades past.

Knowing – as Charlotte does – that there is pain and anger and that there are issues that are no longer underneath the surface related to race and opportunity and the common good.

Trying to live as normal a life as possible in the midst of threats we can't even see: bullies who show up on our screens instead of on playgrounds, thieves who break into our identities instead of our houses, wars that are fought with the weapons of mis-information instead of with steel.

Lord, is this the time?

Is this the time when you will make things right?

We know you can. You are a God of resurrection. You bring life from death. You outpace what we think of as possible. You tell us to not be afraid.

So...is this the time when you will make it right?

Because it feels like it is...

It's a faithful question. A question that demonstrates faith – and trust – in a God who can be trusted to make good on God's promises.

And I wish I could tell that Jesus gave a simple, easy answer to the disciple's question.

But that's not what Jesus does.

And faith – and trust – aren't usually easy...or simple.

Jesus said, "here's what time it is. It is time for you to be my witnesses."

That's the word Jesus gives his disciples.

His answer to hold in the midst of a scary world.

Be my witness.

In the court of law, a witnesses' job is to tell the truth about what they know and what they've seen.

A witness doesn't argue with someone else's testimony.

Other people may have seen something – or known something different.

But the job of a witness to be honest; just tell the truth about what you see and what you know.



Jesus said – you shall be my witnesses.

It's your job, now, to tell the truth about the world I showed to you.

And, as a colleague of mine has said, that means we have two important spiritual disciplines to practice: to be clear about what we see, which is a spiritual practice, and to be honest about what we say, which is a spiritual practice.

I realize that may sound pie in the sky.

And maybe even a little less than satisfying for those of us who have a need to do something.

But ask yourself: where have you seen the power and the presence of God in your life or the world. Where did you see it this week – at work, at home, at school? How would you describe that power – what does it lead you to say?

In my own life, my experience has been that witnesses are the ones who have made faith real...and who have encouraged me, challenged me, and strengthened me to live my faith in ways that are real.

One of the people who have been witness to me is a friend and fellow pastor named Andrew. Andrew lives in Baltimore, Maryland. He's been there for fourteen years – and is about the finest preacher I have ever heard. Bigger churches often come calling – trying to woo him with fancy pulpits and bigger salaries – but Andrew's work is in Baltimore. Andrew has this ability to stand with the people that I know Jesus would care about: Immigrants. Those caught up in the criminal justice system. The poor. People whose voices get lost or are ignored. Andrew has the spiritual gift to see people like that – and he has the spiritual gift to speak...to organize his community and his neighborhood to raise their voice on behalf of those who need it – to speak in corporate boardrooms, and in city council meetings, and in the governor's office. There are a lot of people who aren't afraid of using their voice – to push for their agenda – for the things they think matter – to be loud.

But what makes Andrew a witness for me is that he is able to speak truth in ways that are devoid of self-righteousness. He just knows that these things matter to Jesus. He speaks of the promises of God. And it's compelling. And it is changing that city.

Some other people who have been witnesses to me are so many of you who do so much in so many ways that often go so unnoticed. Those of you who spend hours stocking shelves and facilitating the shopping at our Loaves and Fishes food pantry – the largest food pantry in our city. Those of you who sign up – multiple times - from November through March – as we partner with Room in the Inn to make this church a place of hospitality for women, men, and children in our community who are homeless. Those of you who make the trek out to Westerly Hills to do the incremental work of tutoring – math and reading. And then do it all over again. I do pray for a day when the hungry will be filled – and we won't need food



pantries. I pray for the day when our community will be a place for all people to have a home – and we won't need shelters. I pray for a day when children will live in a city that insists that children show up for school prepared to learn – and not just try to play catch up. But until that day, Jesus has you – as his witnesses who work toward the promise. And your witness encourages my faith.

This past week I was with a group of people who are witnesses to me – my preaching group. One of them, a good friend and history buff, reminded me of the witness of those whose lives illustrate that great quote from William Faulkner, that “the past is never dead. It's not even past.”

Seeking to understand this politically and racially charged moment that we seem to be living in, my friend picked up a biography of President Chester A. Arthur. He decided he needed to know more about that period from the Civil War to the turn of the century – a season of our country's story where things felt scary and divided and out of control. Arthur was President from September 1881 when President Garfield was assassinated, until March of 1885. He is one of those Presidents that no one remembers. His biography ends this way:

In everything he did, Chester Alan Arthur was a gentleman, and that is rare and precious. It reminds us that adversaries can be treated with respect, that democracy can survive differences, and that leadership isn't just great words and deeds. Arthur managed to be a decent man and a decent president in an era when decency was in short supply.

For those who want presidents to be heroes, and failing that, villains, for those who expect them to be larger-than-life figures, Arthur's tenure in office isn't satisfying. The nature of our expectations would have to change dramatically for Arthur to be reevaluated as one of this country's great presidents. And yet, in spite of what Shakespeare wrote, some men are neither born great, nor achieve greatness, nor have it thrust upon them. Some men [and women, and children] just do the best they can in a difficult situation, and sometimes that turns out just fine.

And sometimes – that is a witness that speaks to God's promise.

What is it for you?

My guess is that if we are really being honest with ourselves – we can look around – our homes, our schools, our offices, our neighborhoods – and we can see the things that aren't quite right.

Maybe not all of them – certainly we are blind to some of them – but enough.

Here – in this season of Easter – what do you see?



What truth can you tell?

Who needs to hear those words?

Could you imagine finding the courage to speak them?

You will be my witnesses, Jesus said.

Witnesses to the truth that God's promises are real – that they can be trusted – even in a world that isn't yet what it will be.

You will be my witnesses.

You.

And me.

