

Third Sunday of Easter -- Bob Munshaw
4-19-15

Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

These words were spoken to Jesus' original followers, but as a kind of thesis for this message, I want to suggest that we too, 2000 years later, are witnesses to these things.

Recently I read about a high-school golfer, Chelsee Richard, of Bloomingdale High School in Brandon, Florida. She lost her chance to win the 2004 state championship—by being honest. In the qualifier for the state finals, Chelsee hit her tee shot on the second hole into the rough. Without knowing it, she played another golfer's ball out of the rough and finished the hole. On the third hole, she realized what she had done. The rule is that a golfer must declare, on that hole, that they hit the wrong ball before putting the ball into the hole, or they are disqualified.

Chelsee drew strength from her favorite Bible verse, Philippians 4:13, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*. She reported her error, a painful ending to her senior season and her dream of going to state finals. She said: "With my faith and with God, being honest was the most important thing to me, and that's what is going to advance on throughout my life, being honest and making the right choices." (November, 2004; www.PreachingToday.com)

Her honesty spoke of her Christian faith and the Lord she serves. Honesty is important. The truth really does matter, because it honors Christ. It makes our faith in Jesus more attractive to a world longing for something better than what they have. This is being a witness to the truth of the resurrection.

Our gospel story is a lot like the story of Thomas that Brian shared last week. Let me set the stage: although today we are on the 3rd Sunday of Easter, this story still occurs very shortly after the resurrection. At the beginning of Luke 24, we have the women at the tomb. The angels meet up with them, and remind them that Jesus had told them that he would both die and rise again. In this story, the women don't see Jesus. They merely find the empty tomb and have an interaction with the angels. When they tell the disciples their story of the empty tomb and the angels, the disciples flat out don't believe them—we read that it sounds like nonsense to the disciples. Peter leaves them and goes to the tomb, but when he finds it empty, we read that he leaves the tomb wondering to himself what had happened. Luke then intersperses the story of the disciples with Jesus' encounter with his two followers on the Emmaus road. After Jesus disappears from them, the two return to the rest of Jesus' followers, and are in the midst of telling their story when Jesus suddenly appears in the room with them.

Everything was happening. Think about the week and a half or so that they had just lived through. The tremendous emotional high of the triumphal entry...the washing of the feet and the last supper, the intense and emotional farewell talk that Jesus has with the disciples, recorded in John 13-17...the late night prayer in the garden...the betrayal of

Judas.. the sudden trial, and crucifixion, and the sure feeling that all that they had put their hopes in was lost.

It was bewildering/shocking/gut-wrenching for the disciples. So, when Jesus is suddenly just there in the room with them, not surprisingly, we find that the disciples are startled and frightened, and think that they are seeing a ghost. As with Thomas, Jesus takes the time to dispel their fears. He shows them his hands and feet. He takes a piece of broiled fish and munches on it in front of them. Everybody knows that ghosts don't eat fish. He then took time, just like he did with the guys on the road to Emmaus, to help them to understand the Scriptures, including a reminder that his death and resurrection had been foretold (referencing Psalms 16 and 22 as well as Isaiah 53).

Then he makes the statement, *You are witnesses to these things!* Again, almost 2000 years have passed since Jesus spoke those words. Generation after generation of Christians has lived—and died; only those of that first generation were actually witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection. The rest of use some combination of faith and reason as we reflect on what we believe and why we believe it—and to be honest, for me, that faith is not always easy. Like many in the Scriptures, I have prayed for things and God has not responded to my prayers as ... at least, God has not responded as I have wanted God to. I sometimes have the Job syndrome: "Oh, woe is me. Look at all the grief that I have had to endure in my life." There are also plenty of times when I don't feel close to God like a good Christian should.

The letters of John must have been written just for people like me. Commentaries and evidences in the letter tell us that I John was probably written around the year 100 and possibly in the city of Ephesus...so it was written almost 70 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. All, or almost all of the original followers of Jesus are long dead, and those in the church that John is writing to are apparently having trouble hanging in there as Christ-followers. Chapters 2 and 4 reference some people who have left their church and others who are denying that Christ came in the flesh. This had to have been frustrating, discouraging, painful...and perhaps left them struggling and doubting their own faith in Jesus.

And so, in our passage, John reminds them—and if we can claim the Bible as God's word for us today, John reminds us, in our times of struggle and doubt—God loves us, and we are God's children because of God's love. He recognizes that we are not all that we should be, and all that we want to be, yet—but it is coming. One day we will be like him, so stay the course. Hang in there. Have faith as a child of God.

But again, it was much easier for me to have that childlike faith when I was a child. When I was just a wee lad in Estevan, Saskatchewan, just 30 miles from North Dakota, there were so many things I knew with certainty. I had no doubts about whether or not Jesus had risen. Of course he had risen. I had no doubts that God loved me. It was easy to believe those things with loving parents who regularly told me of God's love. But the faith of a child is also a pretty immature faith, and is easily confused about many things.

John says to these Christians that those who live in the hope of God should *purify themselves* (v.3). They should not be lawless (v.4). They should live without sin (v.5-6). They should do *what is right* (v.7). What does this mean? What does it look like to live as *pure* and *righteous*? What makes us the witnesses of God's truth?

As a child, I was often confused about what this looks like. I had no doubts that the Free Methodists were the one true church, that the Baptists were okay, and that Catholics might be worse than atheists. I had no doubts about a lot of other things, too...like that people who smoked and drank were deeply sinful, that there was something intrinsically wrong with dances, that movies and people who went to them were sketchy...that cards held within themselves some sort of evil...

Of course, now I know that much of that is hooey, and was a product of my Free Methodist environs. But, what bathwater can be thrown out here, without losing the proverbial baby? How does faith grow, from a list of things that Christians can and can't do, to maturity, where I am truly a witness to being a child of God?

One of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner, says this of faith: "Faith is better understood as a verb than a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you're going, but going anyway. A journey without maps. Tillich said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." (Wishful Thinking, p.30)

Faith is a life of trust in God lived out practically, even if sometimes imperfectly. We live in the knowledge of God's love for us. We strive to be pure...even as we struggle with our doubts, fears, and brokenness.

In our Acts 3 story, we find Peter speaking/preaching to a crowd. Why is there a crowd? Because a man crippled from birth, a man people recognized as the guy who daily was out by the temple gate begging, was now *walking and leaping and praising God*. Let's be honest. That's kind of a big deal.

And Peter, in Acts 3, takes opportunity here to be a witness to the crowd...just as Jesus had told the disciples to be in Luke 24. We don't have time to look at his whole sermon here, but I do want to touch on one thing briefly: look at v. 19. In the sermon, Peter has outlined all these things that they have done wrong concerning Jesus, and then he tells them to repent...turn around...God is desiring to forgive you, to wipe out your sins, but you have to repent.

How can we be witnesses to God's love and grace if we stay as we are?

Note that Peter's message is both graceful and convicting. He does not just tell them that God loves and forgives them. Faith in God is more than just assenting to a creed—it is also allowing God to change us. Peter tells the crowd to *repent* and *turn to God*, so that *sins might be wiped out*. Now most of us totally understand that confessing sins is not the same as repenting. To confess means we are admitting to God and others that we have

sinned, but to repent is to act, and this is a regular message in the New Testament. At the beginning of Mark's gospel, we find the first message of Jesus, the very first word of Jesus is: *Repent*—metanoeo. The word is all over the New Testament. In Romans, Paul does not use this specific word, but calls for the same thing. *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind* (making your bodies living sacrifices).

The message of I John reiterates this point. The message is that those who are children of God will seek to purify themselves...they will abide in God, they will allow God to take their sin, and seek to do what is righteous. This is metanoia. It is an internal transformation of the heart that will bring external results. It is allowing God to be God in my life: God/ Lord/ head/ leader/shot-caller/etc.

A life of faith demonstrates itself as a life of love—love of God and love of others. Growing up, we often sang the hymn, “They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love.” This was the message of Jesus. This is not to say that there is not important content to what we believe. Of course there is, but we will never be effective witnesses to God's love if we don't, or won't, learn to practically and truly love God and others.

If they had had a couple of shekels, Peter and John could have tossed them to the beggar at the temple. Honestly, it is what I probably would have done. Or they might have ignored the crippled beggar and his pleas. But, they did neither. They met the man, and took a step of faith, allowing God to heal the man through them. And because they were obedient, the door was opened for Peter to preach...and we read later on in chapter 4 that *many who heard the message believed, and the number of men* (who counted themselves believers) *grew to about 5000*.

Again, what I am saying here is that as God works in our lives, as we experience God in our lives, we become ever more effective witnesses to the crucified and risen Christ of Easter. This is the way that we become witnesses to the love and the grace of God. Let me close with the oft-quoted words of St. Francis of Assisi, who reminded his followers to “preach the gospel at all times, and, when necessary, use words.”