

BEING WITNESSES

Luke 24:35-48

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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You may be thinking, “We heard this same text just last Sunday.” But you didn’t. Last Sunday the story the Risen Christ’s first appearance in the Upper Room was from John’s Gospel, not Luke’s. It is basically the same story but both John and Luke put their own spin on it.

Keep in mind Mark wrote his Gospel around 70 AD. Matthew later used Mark’s Gospel as an outline for his own. He told the same stories but Matthew had a slightly different twist than Mark. Matthew basically said to himself, “Hmmm, I like what Mark wrote and I appreciate the way he wrote it, but I have something else to say about it.

Likewise Luke and later John did pretty much the same thing. That explains why there sometimes seems to be discrepancies or even contradictions in each of the four Gospels. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John weren’t trying to write histories of Jesus’ life. Instead each of them used the stories about Jesus to make nuanced theological statements about Jesus that never contradicted but always complimented each other.

Here’s an example of what I mean. John tells the story of Jesus’ first appearance in the Upper Room on Easter evening followed by his second appearance the following Sunday for the benefit of Thomas, who wasn’t there the first time. In his telling John wanted to emphasize the tension between doubt and faith because Thomas doubted everything the other disciples told him about seeing Jesus.

Now, John’s Gospel written in the 90’s, was written for a generation three times removed from the resurrection. His readers never saw the Risen Christ because they lived sixty years later. John emphasized Jesus’ encounter with Thomas to encourage his readers to believe in Christ’s resurrection even though they never saw the Risen Christ with their own two eyes.

Luke, on the other hand, doesn’t focus on the disciples’ doubts but their fears. Luke writes, “While they were talking about this (the latest sighting of the Risen Christ) Jesus himself stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost” (Luke 24:36-37)

Cleopas and an unnamed companion had just returned from Emmaus, a village seven miles from Jerusalem. Their eyes were opened when a stranger they met on the road turned out to be Jesus. Immediately they ran back to Jerusalem to tell everyone, “The Lord has risen

indeed..." They then told the disciples all about their encounter with the Risen Christ who explained how his suffering and death were in fulfillment of the scriptures.

In other words the crucifixion wasn't a tragic mistake, it was God's plan.

You'd think right away the disciples would've been ecstatic.

Instead, according to Luke, they were "startled and terrified."

So again, John wanted to address our doubts while Luke chose to address our fears. Last Sunday we focused on our doubts. This morning we will focus on our fears, which are really not very different from the disciples' fears, two thousand years ago.

According to Luke they were absolutely terrified by Christ's sudden appearance. They thought he was a ghost. It took several attempts before Jesus finally calmed them down, first by showing them his wounds so they could see he was flesh and blood and then he ate a piece of broiled fish because ghosts don't eat broiled fish or anything else for that matter. Finally they believed.

Doubts and fears. We all have doubts and fears. We'd rather have certainty because if we are certain about something we tell ourselves we'd never be afraid. Isn't that what happened in the Upper Room when Jesus finally proved himself? All their doubts turned into certainty and they were no longer afraid. Right?

I'm sure we all said at one time or another, 'Boy, if I saw Jesus with my own two eyes, I'd never doubt or be afraid again!' But even if Jesus suddenly did appear right now in this room we might be certain and brave in the moment, but what would happen when you're told the time has come to go back out into the world and be witnesses of Christ's resurrection? Would you still be certain and brave or would our doubts and fears return?

The truth is doubts and fears are encoded into the human condition. But so is the capacity for trust and courage. I don't think God ever intended us to be always certain and brave every moment of every day but it is God's will that we learn to trust in the unseen and set aside our fears whenever called upon to do something important for Christ and his Kingdom.

However before we can ever do something important for Christ and his Kingdom we have to be willing to do it. And before we are willing to do it we need to reappraise our understanding of what it means to be disciples of Christ raised up to new life.

Contrary to what the likes of Joel Osteen preaches Christ didn't die and rise again so you can be rich and happy and give off the top. Show me one verse that supports that. After the resurrection Jesus never said, "OK boys, go back to your fishing boats, your carpenter shops and your flocks of sheep and be prepared to make more money and experience more happiness than you ever dared dream possible. Just think positive thoughts and consider the possibilities.

The world is your oyster for the taking. Be fruitful and multiply your stock portfolio. All you have to do is be certain and brave. You have it in you, unleash the power!"

Besides being nonsense it's heretical. It also degrades Christ's sacrifice and the brave prophets and apostles who denied themselves and followed Jesus as loyal servants of his Gospel.

Then what is it that Christ calls us to do that takes faith and courage?

Here it is:

The Risen Christ said, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to raise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations beginning with Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my father promised so stay here until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:46-49)

"You are to be witnesses." What does that mean? First, what does it not mean? Being a witness doesn't mean you corner someone and hit him over the head with your Bible in one hand and platitudes in the other.

A witness is someone who "sees or experiences something and then to the best of her ability makes a statement about what she knows to be true." That's the dictionary's definition. But witnessing implies more than seeing or knowing. A good witness not only knows the truth but also knows how to communicate the truth in a positive, unthreatening manner.

Sometimes in the courtroom the witness' testimony isn't taken seriously by the jury if the witness comes across being insincere, self-serving or just plain unlikeable. Unfortunately some Christians set up themselves as witnesses to Christ's Gospel but come across as insincere, self-serving and just plain unlikeable. Why? Because they seem to have a not so hidden agenda. They turn people off instead of drawing people in. They end up giving what no one wants because they are posing questions no one is asking.

Many people today don't attend worship or support organized religion but they are searching for meaning. If they are to be reached we can't be approaching them on our terms. Instead we need to approach them on their terms. In part that means we can't try to dragoon them into becoming dues paying members. It does mean we must leave them with the impression our only agenda is to engage them, love them and serve them in a Christ-like manner.

This approach takes a lot of prayer, effort and time. We can't expect instant gratification. ("I caught me one for Jesus, now I just have to reel him in!")

I suspect none, if any, of you would never witness like that for Christ. Instead our problem is we are afraid of being witnesses at all because we really don't know how to go about it in an authentic and engaging way. Remember the question I posed several months back? What do you get if you cross a Jehovah witness with a Presbyterian? Someone who knocks on your door but doesn't say anything.

The Good News is you aren't expected to memorize a sales pitch and repeat it verbatim. However when a Christian cooperates with God and discovers his or her passions as an individual and as a member of a congregation or better still a ministry team and then redefines and refocuses that mission as an individual and a member of a congregation or ministry team that's when real changes in peoples' lives happen and the quality of life in the neighborhood changes.

Last Sunday Cathy Lawson presented a four star minute for mission reporting where we are in the New Beginnings process. We have almost forty members signed up in small house groups that will meet once a week for six weeks to have prayerful, meaningful conversations about Babcock's future. God is calling us to be faithful witnesses of our personal experiences with the Risen Christ. And one way to begin is by asking our neighbors about their needs and then partner with them so we can be an outpost of love and change in Loch Raven Village. In short we are members of the Body of Christ so we can put flesh and blood, our own flesh and blood, on Christ's Gospel of salvation, justice and love.

The leaders of the House Groups, Emily Meoli, Chris Sartor, Cathy Lawson, Jenn Pearson, Monica Addison-Walker and Liz Stafford, need you to get involved by sacrificing your time and when the time comes overcome your doubts and fears and begin to risk yourself for the Risen Christ who wants to raise you up as his witnesses here in this place. So, if you sense the Holy Spirit pulling at you, talk to God and ask him what he wants you to do about it.

Jesus said to them, "You are witnesses of these things... I am sending upon you what the Father has promised so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

One more thing to think about. The small groups will be meeting up until the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples gathered in the Upper Room and transformed them into Christ's fearless, happy troublemakers.

Is this a coincidence or is it God's timing?