

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
May 4, 2008
7th Sunday of Easter
Acts 1:1-14

Can I Get a Witness?

It is a funny mental picture, isn't it? All of those disciples standing around, craning their necks, looking up at...nothing? Clouds? The bright sun? I can see it easily in my imagination. One of them has a hand shielding his eyes. Another one has his hands cupping his face. A third has his fists planted on his hips. All of them look bewildered, shocked. One looks very sad. The rest—confused. But all of them are looking up at...nothing.

And Luke tells us that two men in white robes come and stand with them. And probably, for a few moments, the strangers look up too. But the disciples are so focused on looking at where Jesus had just been, they do not even notice the presence of the others. One of the white-robed men speaks. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" That is a silly question. I mean—we know why there are looking up – Jesus had just been with them for 40 days after Easter, teaching and reminding them of all he had started to do in his ministry on earth...inviting them to become a part of his work after he returned to the Father. And then—he was gone. Vanished. Taken up. Returned. Ascended. However you want to put it. Luke just wants us to know that the Risen Jesus was there, and then, just as promised, he wasn't. Of course the disciples are looking up. Wouldn't you be, too?

I bet you would. I bet we all would. If we had been a part of that original crowd, seeing, hearing and knowing Jesus up-close and personal, then we, too, would have stood there, necks craning up to the sky, hands clasping faces, shielding eyes, or planted on hips. After all, Jesus had promised that though he was going away, he would return to restore God's reign in full. So I bet we, like those disciples, would have stood there, dust in between our toes, necks beginning to ache from the constant strain of looking up. Jesus promised he would be back. So shouldn't we just wait around for the return?

I sometimes wonder if we find ourselves doing just that—just kind of standing around, waiting for Jesus' return. Waiting for God to finish what God started from before the beginning. Waiting for the restoration of creation. Waiting for the time of complete peace and goodness and mercy and joy. It makes sense why we would just wait. We know good and well that we cannot bring in the reign of God by ourselves. The church learned that most recently in the 1960's. And, we know good and well that we are not saved by our good works, that we are not issued tickets to heaven based on some cosmic report card. We are saved because of who God is and what God has already done in Jesus. Furthermore, we know good and well that God is the one in charge, not us. That claim is on Jesus' own lips. He told those first disciples "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority."

So, it makes sense that we often find ourselves, being good church people and doing our own thing: working our jobs, nurturing our families, relaxing with our friends, going to church...while all the while we are spiritually standing on stationary feet, dust in between our toes, craning our necks and waiting. Come on Jesus, we say, hurry on back and finish what you started. We are growing weary of standing here and waiting.

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" the white-robed stranger asked. "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." And following his statement the disciples brought their eyes down to earth and returned to Jerusalem. And I am left stupefied by their action. Why, after all that waiting, did they so quickly leave their posts? Was it seeing the white robed strangers standing in their midst? Or, were they simply tired and hungry and wanted to go home? Or, was it because the surprising presence of those white-robed men reminded them of Jesus' other final words-- the promise of the Spirit's power and the call on their life together.

Earlier, in response to their question desiring a time-table for restoration, Jesus replied that they did not need to worry about when God would restore the kingdom, for God had it firmly in hand. HOWEVER, until that time came, they had good news to share and works of love and justice to do. Jesus then told them that they were going to receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they were going to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of all the earth.

In other words, in response to their question, Jesus did not say “Y’all just wait around for me to return. Your work is done. I don’t desire anything else from you.” On the contrary, Jesus promised them that just like his mother Mary, they, too, as his body on earth, would be overshadowed by the Spirit and filled with its power. And, this overshadowing of the Spirit had a call that went with it. They, us, the church, were called to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Jesus’ disciples, as the church, were not called to simply stand around waiting for God to get back to finish what had been started. They, as Jesus’ disciples, as the church, were not told to simply pack up their discipleship sandals, put the robes back into the closet, and go back to normal, everyday life as they had lived it before that manger in Bethlehem. Not at all.

Those disciples, as the church, were now called to testify—to tell the truth of God’s story in Jesus Christ in all that they said and with all that they did. With his words, Jesus let them know that the story of his ministry here on earth had only just **begun**ⁱ with what he had done and taught while he was with them. Now they, as his body, as the church, were called to carry it on. They were called to continue what Jesus had begun to do and teach. They were called to be his witnesses all the way to Timbuktu.

Put simply, Jesus was letting them know, is letting us know, that the church, his body, is not simply something you join, but the active body of Christ in which you **participate**. Jesus’ ministry here on earth was nowhere near finished when he ascended back into the triune God. On the contrary, everything was just getting started. The Holy Spirit was on the way and the church’s public ministry was just beginning. This was not the time for his disciples to stand around and wait. This was the time to speak of all they knew of God’s mighty acts. This was the time to be God’s witnesses.

And guess what, you good Presbyterians, that time for witness and testimony is still ripe. Like those first disciples, we are called to stop standing around looking up to heaven, and to bring our own eyes back down to earth so we might tell the truth of God’s story in our daily words and with our daily lives.

In reflecting on our call to be God’s witnesses, preacher Tom Long writes that “we need to think of ourselves as more than just ‘church people,’ as more than people who go about our daily business and who have a quiet, almost secret compartment in our lives where we are religious. We cannot be human, much less faithful to God, if we keep silent. We must begin to think of ourselves—dare we claim the name?—as witnessesⁱⁱ.”

Now I realize that for many of us, the word “witness” is rather loaded and carries some baggage perhaps from other religious traditions in your past. In that same book, Dr. Long tells of a man he knew who, when greeted with a sociable “Hello, how are you?” would invariably respond, “Saved! How are you?ⁱⁱⁱ” I don’t believe that is what Jesus is talking about when he charges his disciples, his church, to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Being God’s witness is not about looking religious or even growing the church. We are God’s witnesses for one purpose—to tell the truth about what we have seen and heard. To continue all that Jesus had begun to do and to teach. To not simply **join** Woodhaven Presbyterian Church, but to **participate** in the living, breathing body of Christ here on earth. To stop waiting around, looking up at the sky, content with the way things are until Jesus returns.

We, just like those first disciples, are called to speak of the fullness of God's presence in and for the world. We are called to tell the story of a God who knows and loves us, the story of a God who brings justice to a broken world. As followers of Jesus, those who have received the power of the Spirit, we are to tell that story, even during those times when we, ourselves, struggle to fully understand and almost have to speak ourselves into our own faith once again.

But let me testify to you for a moment. Even though I do think that from time to time, we all want to just stare up in the sky and tell Jesus to hurry it on up, it is not like you all don't know how to be Christ's witnesses. I am just not sure you know you are doing it. And I suspect some of you might be pretty nervous to claim you are doing it too.

But frankly, I have seen a lot of witnessing this past week in my ministry with you. I saw it in Wills Point on Wednesday as I stood in front of a casket. A small group of disciples gathered in that small funeral home to give testimony to Jesus' promise that death is not the end nor is it the victor. The worship that happens in a memorial service is an act of witness. We are saying that we believe God is bigger than even the power of death and that the day will come when death is no more.

I have repeatedly seen you witness to Christ's presence and love with the Schmidt family as Patty gets closer to the threshold of her death. Charles told me that some of you have sent cards with written prayers every week for the last seven months. Some of you show up with food so he does not have to think about it. Some of you put flowers and plants on their doorstep to remind them of the gift of creation. Some of you call and volunteer to come and sit with Patty so he can go get breathing space. Those acts of care and compassion are acts of being a witness. You are saying that even in the midst of the dark valley of cancer, the Holy Spirit hovers with and over them and they are not alone. They will never be alone.

I heard of your witness when I talked to some visitors the other day and they went on and on about how so many of you greeted them warmly, gave them bulletins, helped them find a seat, invited them to come back, and just plain made them feel welcome. Those acts of hospitality and graciousness are acts of being a witness. You are saying that in Jesus Christ, no one is a stranger and all people are to be welcomed as family.

You, we, are witnesses in different ways all the time. So perhaps our call from this text is to recognize and claim that gift. To not shy away from telling the story, God's story. To continue all that Jesus had begun to do and teach, both living it with our lives and telling it with our words. And though I think that sometimes our Presbyterian souls shudder when we think of the call to be Christ's witnesses, it is part of what it means to participate in the church, Christ's body on earth. For the Holy Spirit has overshadowed us. We have been named, claimed and called. And the time is ripe to tell of all we have seen and heard. To tell the story of a God who so loves the world that God chose to become weak in power in order to be powerfully strong in love.

That promise and that call were enough to get the disciples moving in ministry. It is enough for us, as well.

ⁱ Thanks to Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin for this insight into better Greek translation of Acts 1:1. Her rendering is: "I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach." It helps us to realize that the action is still ongoing. Jesus began, we continue. Portable Snack Paper, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Long, Tom. Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian. San Francisco: Josey-Bass Pub, 2004. Pages 28-29.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. Page 23.