

“We Are Witnesses”

Acts 10:34-43

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A witness is somebody who has seen something happen and may be held accountable for reporting whatever it is that took place. Peter considers himself a witness to the Resurrection. It's not just that he has seen the empty tomb and the burial linens neatly folded; it's that he has witnessed the evidence of God's reconciling love. It's all around him. He is astounded by it! A man lame from birth is now leaping for joy. One who tried to suppress the news of the Resurrection by handcuffing believers and dragging them off to jail is now proclaiming that Good News from Damascus to Rome. One who had always thought of herself as unworthy now has gained self-worth. For Peter, the Resurrection is not an intellectual concept to discuss or to debate; it is a present force to embrace.

When he says to the other apostles, “We are witnesses,” he is saying, ‘we are seeing with our own eyes what happens when people choose to believe in the power of the Resurrection; and we have an obligation to report to others what we are seeing.’

In all the TV courtroom dramas, there are always the reluctant witnesses who can name all the reasons they should keep what they know to themselves. But before the hour is up, the persuasive district attorney has convinced one of the witnesses to tell what he or she has seen. And this, of course, makes all the difference! What the churches need today is men and women, boys and girls, who are willing to be witnesses, who are willing to say out loud, in public, ‘let me tell you how I have experienced the reconciling love of God.’ This is what makes all the difference.

Last December, on the first Sunday in Advent, I suggested in a sermon that one way to prepare for the birth of Christ is to go to those individuals we have wronged and to ask for their forgiveness. I then told about my own lingering need to ask forgiveness of a high school classmate, a Jewish man in whose presence I had made a wounding, anti-Semitic remark. Though this incident happened forty five years ago, it still weighed heavily on my conscience. My wounding of him had become a wound in me. A few weeks after that sermon, I googled his name to find his mailing address. I wrote him a letter seeking his forgiveness. Early in January, I received the reply. The envelope was marked 'confidential.' He assured me of his unconditional forgiveness. He wrote, "I of course accept your apology without reservation." He then encouraged me to continue my involvement in inter-faith dialogue. He thanked me for my letter. I got to the bottom of the page, read his signature, and just felt this enormous release, this grace. I felt like a new person! A forty five year old wound had been finally healed. For me, it was an Easter day! Now, I am a witness. Now I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who stands in awe of God and does what is right is acceptable to God.

I thank God for the courage to have named the wound, for the courage to have written the letter, and for the courage to have opened the reply from Dr. Peter Hacker, MD. I tell you this story not because I may, but because I must; because I am now a witness to the Resurrection. No, I was not there when they arrested him or when they tried him or when they crucified him. No, I was not there when they found the tomb empty and heard the angel's announcement that he had risen. But I am here now. And what I have seen is that God is able to raise us up from whatever tomb we have fallen into.

In the last verse of the Easter story read this morning, Peter leaves the empty tomb amazed. It says he was amazed at what had happened. One way to talk about the mystery of Easter's resurrection is to talk about those things that amaze us. I find myself amazed by the decisions people make on faith. I was amazed when two sisters decided to invite their friends to bring to their birthday parties no gifts, but to bring instead the money they would have spent as a donation to the youth mission endeavor at their church. Those gifts were the leaven in the loaf. They represent the two by fours that will become the stud walls that will become a home for a family who had no home. Those gifts are an expression of Easter's hope.

I am amazed by two other girls who decided to set up a lemonade stand on Tryon Street right after hurricane Katrina did her damage. The money from that stand was the very first gift to the resurrecting of the Hancock County food pantry in rural Mississippi. Some of the adults on the recent mission trip witnessed its rebirth. Frank Manchester kept insisting that we go and see the new food pantry. Some of us resisted because there was work to be done elsewhere. But Frank persisted! Consciously or unconsciously, he wanted us to witness the evidence of Easter's hope. The compassion of those two Tryon Street girls for their neighbors is an expression of that hope.

I am amazed by the Finocchiaro Family's decision to make Greg's heart available to a woman named Kimberly who was about to die of heart failure. When it became clear, after the accident on I-95, that their son would not survive, they made a decision to choose life for a stranger. How does a family make such a decision? How do Tommy and Marsha and Mark and Amy make this decision? It is because of a deep knowing of what is the right thing to do. The Finocchiaro's story is an expression of Easter's hope.

Peter says to the apostles, “We are witnesses.” Peter speaks to all of us here, “We are witnesses.” We have a story to tell. We who have had experiences of the reconciling love of God are witnesses to Easter’s dawn. We may not have been there that morning, but we have been **there!** We have been in that tomb. We have been in that darkness. And we have been raised out of the tomb by a force of love that can never be fully understood, a force of love that defies scientific analysis, a force of love that asks only to be embraced. This is where the Easter story carried me this week. As always, I share it with you in the greatest of hope. Amen!