

*We are Witnesses*

Lessons: Matthew 28:1-10, Acts 10:34-43

Mary goes to a graveyard to honor and remember, and a messenger tells her not to be afraid and invites her to come closer and see; then he orders her to go and tell. Mary becomes a witness to declare, "I have seen the Lord." The two Marys tell what they saw (and what they did not see), and then Jesus appears to the followers. He tells them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell what you have seen.

Two friends walking home to Emmaus are disappointed about Passover and about the crucifixion of their Hope for Messiah. The stranger in the road gets recognized as the risen Lord when he breaks bread with them. So they run back to tell what they have seen and heard.

Peter goes and tells about the Savior who was crucified and the risen Lord he has seen and heard. But before that he is afraid to eat food called "unclean." The Lord appears to him in a dream to tell him that what God has made clean cannot be unclean. Christ has made Peter clean, and he can tell others that they are made by God and clean. Peter sees the good news of God's saving love is not just for Jews in the tradition and history, but for everyone. Peter's message is to everyone including us and all the people we know or meet along the way. "In every nation anyone who fears, who respects God and does what is right, is acceptable to God" because "Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all."

We are witnesses that life have been changed forever by an empty tomb and a risen Lord. God has done more than help us with their current world and living. The resurrection of Jesus is more than a miracle.

"Do not be afraid! He is not here in a tomb. He has been raised, as he said." The messenger's theme at an empty tomb is the same as it was at a manger. "Do not be afraid! I have good neww of a great joy for all the people." The "word made flesh" has become the "victor over sin and death."

**Do not be afraid of the ways that God comes to you, of the things that God tells you to do.**

Christ is alive. The spirit of God is love and grace and power, and it is running loose in the world. God is always speaking. Love is always at work. Christ is always calling you. Christ is inviting you to trust the power of God's love that you see in the resurrection, and apply that power to the things in your life you want to see replaced with new life, the old patterns that you want to see changed to new paths. Christ did not die to help you suffer with things you do not want to live with. Christ died to put those things to death, and gift you with new life in new ways.

We humans are strange creatures. We do not live dominated by instinct like other animals do. But we have habits of choices we have learned from others or ingrained by, ...well, habit. Psychologists tell us that habits can be a very good thing when the things we do by habit are good.

But bad habits are not good things, because the habits have more power over us than we want to admit. We can know we have a bad habit, but we resist changing the habit. Deep down, the resistance is about fear! We are more afraid of the change to something new than the pain of keeping something old. Counselors call this “homeostasis”: the tendency to go back to the old normal even when we try to do something new, because the comfortable old is easier than a better new that makes us feel strange. Like Peter did while warming hands at a fire on Friday morning.

Maybe there is something in your life that has beaten on you until you are left lying in a ditch. People pass you by, afraid to get close or afraid to say something. Then someone comes along and says, “You are hurt. You have been traveling on the wrong road. Let me help. I’ll get you to help.”

I wonder if the Jew in the ditch worried about a good Samaritan stopping to be his Savior? I wonder if we see a person trying to help us when we are need with suspicion or as a friend, as an agent or angel messenger God has sent to help us? I wonder what would happen if Jesus walked through a door and said we do not have to put up with some habit or condition or problem we live with?

Are we more afraid of the help than we are of the old pattern we have learned to cope with? Why else would we turn down an offer from a God who loves us so much we get the gift of a very human Jesus to show us the good life, and we get the gift of a resurrection from the dead to show us that God has the power to get us out of any ditch.

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**Do not be afraid of what God is able to do, because God gives you the power to do what God wants you to go.**

Just look at Peter as a prime example. Here is the guy who did the exact thing Jesus warned him he would do when Peter protested he would never do it. And yet, after Peter had seen the risen Lord, experienced the resurrection, he understood that God had the power to do most anything - including deal with him in all his stupidity and weakness.

He gets just enough courage to choose to do what God wants him to do, and he winds up a changed man in lots of ways - especially the ways that mattered to Peter and Christ. And God kept changing him, kept working with him until he had the courage to tell people what God had done in the world and was doing in his own life.

Peter was thinking that a few were chosen for the new movement. Only the people like him (meaning Jews) were the chosen by God to be chosen people for salvation. Then he gets a dream about a officer in the Roman army, and God tells him that Christ is a lot less particular about who he saves than we think. He came to save the whole world.

I hope we Presbyterians are past the whole thing about “electing some” and deciding others are not special and bound to ...well, to that place some traditions say Jesus preached for three days and then left them to their eternal suffering.

Peter learns that in Christ, God has chosen to give saving love to everybody and God has the power to save / change anybody. Peter's job is not to decide who is in or out, who deserves or can hear the message and who can't. Peter's job is to tell everybody, so they can decide whether or not they want this saving love.

The message of the cross and resurrection is so simple anyone like Peter can tell it to anybody. Here is the good news of Resurrection Sunday: Nothing I can do can make God love me less, and nothing I can do can make God love me more. I can choose to see the life I ought to live when I look at Jesus, and God will make sure I have the power I need to live Christ's life. I have no reason to be afraid of a new life, and no reason to turn down a deal like. After all, God comes through with resurrections from death to old life and a gift of a new life everyday since that first day. ...And God has come through for me everyday since my first day.

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**Do not be afraid of paths that you have never walked before, to destinations beyond your knowing or even imagining.**

Of course, we can never know where God is taking us on this new journey. These followers who had seen the Lord didn't have all that much direction, either. Jesus didn't give green line to security into the future like you see in a fictitious finances commercial. Jesus spent a lot more time telling them what to do and how to live than where they were headed. They trusted, focused on the what and how, knowing Jesus would take care of the where they were headed.

"Be afraid. Be very afraid." We live in a world that tells us to stay scared all the time. We listen too much to the messages about the bad things that may be waiting just over the horizon. They will come from every and all directions. That way of looking to the future does not seem to be working all that well for anyone. It hasn't worked in a long time. It's an old way that helped put Jesus on the cross. They were afraid of him, very afraid of his new ways.

"Do not be afraid." Let's be followers and model a different way of walking into the future and looking at what God has given us to do and asking how God wants us to do what is right in front us in the path. Let's trust a God who raises salvation out of death, and let's not worry all that much past the next three or four days. God will always show us the path within three or four days when we are listening for the what to do and trying to learn the how to do. We can trust a God who has shown how much we are loved even if God points us down a road we have never seen before.

**Do not be afraid of paths that you have never walked before, to destinations beyond your knowing or even imagining.**

**Do not be afraid to tell people about the changes God is bringing to your life, and invite them to join the different paths you are walking.**

Walking God's different path will make you look different, give you a "brand new image." I don't mean some advertising gimmick where companies change colors and a logo and a slogan but keep doing business as usual.

No, I mean an “image” like the one in your mirror. When we change our ways, we start seeing the difference in ourselves for real. And when we change our ways to look more like Christ’s ways, we start really looking like Christ. When we do live the life that Christ would live, we live differently from others around us. And we just invite others to live the life that we live. We tell what we have seen and heard in our own lives. Most all of us are not called to preach to great crowds that gather to hear. Most all us are not gifted to be leaders of the church like Peter was.

Wait! Peter is the one we identify with the most. He is the guy who does exactly the wrong thing when he protests he will not do it. He is the guy who listens to people who think the gospel is for everyone, and doesn’t agree. He is the fellow who thinks protecting the Savior of the world necessitates taking a swipe at a soldier’s ear with a sword. He is the fellow who is afraid to break the protocol on what foods are safe, and does not want to venture down a strange, new road even when commanded to do so by God. Peter is the guy who has already done most of the things we find ourselves thinking and doing. And Peter is the one who said he was a witness to the resurrection - not just seeing Jesus raised from the dead, but seeing what God has done to raise a new life in him.

So if Peter can go and tell, so can we. This sermon in Acts did not start as a big event and part of some planned campaign. God told Peter to go and visit a Roman soldier, sit down with him across a table, and tell him the good news that he could have a new life because a humble servant and holy man who was divine Love in body and blood. Peter could do that. He had sat at a table with friends and talked about Jesus. We can sit at table and talk with friends about Jesus. We can be witnesses of what we have seen and heard in our own lives. We can go and tell people, like Peter and Mary did that day, “I have seen the Lord. The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.”

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The Lord is risen! He is alive and present among us. Christ in us is the hope of glory, and we are victors over our own sin and the world’s death through him who loved us and gave himself for us!