

“Being Witnesses”

April 18, 2021

Scripture: I John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

I find the resurrection stories in the gospels fascinating. What really intrigues me about them is how different they all are. If you read them side by side, you'll find there really aren't that many similarities between them, at least not as many as it seems like there should be. Even the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – the books that have so many identical stories, agree on very few details when it comes to resurrection stories. I've thought a lot about why that might be. Why would a memory so central to our faith and our tradition be so uncertain?

The best explanation I've found is to think about these stories not as historical accounts so much as impressionistic paintings. The writers of the gospels are trying to describe an experience that is fundamentally indescribable. It's as if they're telling us that resurrection is a matter of faith, not something that can be proved or documented. And what lies behind all the stories is the understanding that it doesn't end with Jesus. Jesus' resurrection is only the beginning, the beginning of a new reality we're all invited to share.

Jesus' final words in the passage we heard this morning carry the greatest challenge for the gospel writers and for all those who put their trust in these words. “You are witnesses of these things,” Jesus tells them. But how? What is the content of their witness? We know that the writers of the gospels, and everyone who has come after them, weren't actually eye witnesses to what happened. The gospels arose decades after the events they depict. How can we be witnesses to things we've never actually seen?

Last week after church I had a chance to watch part of the video produced by the Holocaust Resource Center of Buffalo at the end of Holocaust Remembrance Week. It was beautifully done, if you have a chance to see it I hope you'll take some time to watch. It's filled with music and prayers and poetry. But the most powerful part I thought were the memories shared by survivors and the children of survivors. What especially struck me was the realization that even the children of survivors are quite old, and it won't be long before there are no eye witnesses left to tell what happened. (You can see the video here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kSAhtF_DLQ)

That presents a real problem. Even now, while there are still witnesses, when there are museums and memorials all over the world, when documentation exists to verify the atrocities committed, there are many people in the world who deny it really happened or that it was as bad as it's claimed. I follow a Twitter feed called Auschwitz Memorial. Every day it lists, in separate tweets, the names of people who were born that day in 1921 or 1895 or 1940, often with a family picture, or more often a mug shot from Auschwitz. Each one tells the day they were incarcerated and the day they died. Not a day goes by that someone born that day was murdered in the camp. There is indisputable evidence, yet many refuse to believe it.

What does it mean to be a witness to something when everyone who actually saw it is gone? That's a question that lies beneath all the gospels and the letters of the New Testament. In First John the writer is concerned that his community develop a new understanding of itself in relation to God. By identifying as God's children, the product of God's love, they have a new purpose and a new ethic. They're living as God's children and in time they will be like God. But for now, their life is their witness.

Now, the word for witness in Greek is *marturios*, martyr. A witness is more than just a passive observer. It's not enough just to share what's been seen. Being a witness to the resurrection means taking a stand for life over death, love over hate, hope over despair. What Jesus is telling his disciples is now that they know God is more powerful than death they must show the world what that means. When hope overcomes despair it's impossible to keep that to ourselves. It changes us and opens us to possibilities unimaginable before.

As witnesses to the resurrection the disciples became advocates for the poor and marginalized of the world. They created communities of hope throughout the Roman Empire and slowly undermined the foundations of an unjust and violent system.

In many of the stories told by Holocaust survivors and their children, after they were liberated many of them became outspoken advocates for the rights of people marginalized in this country and others around the world. Being witnesses has meant more than just telling what happened. It's meant speaking out for justice and love against tyranny and hate. Many from that generation marched alongside Martin Luther King, many of them became civil rights lawyers, teachers in impoverished school districts, healthcare workers for people who lacked access to proper care. They lived their witness through compassion, justice and love.

The stories of resurrection teach us what South African Bishop Desmond Tutu once said, words that have been set to music:

*"Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours, victory is ours through God who loves us!
Victory is ours, victory is ours through God who loves us!"*

Tutu spoke those words in the midst of Apartheid in South Africa at a time when many could not imagine an end to that atrocity. But resurrection taught him love, justice, hope would finally win.

Folks, we know the kind of world we live in. We know how risky it is to speak out and stand up with people who are marginalized or unjustly treated. Being witnesses in a world where we are surrounded by fear and hatred, where gun violence takes the lives of tens of thousands of people every year, where racial injustice is embedded in our culture and poverty is passed from one generation to the next, it can feel as if we're powerless. But we carry the news of resurrection; the news that life wins over death, hope wins over despair, love wins over hate. And we must stand as witnesses no matter what the danger or how long the odds are against us. The world needs resurrection and God needs us to be its witness.

Amen