

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Walking Witnesses: Second Guessed”

Rev. Mark Lampley

Luke 24:6-12

April 16, 2023

Last Sunday, Pastor Jay began leading us through Luke chapter 24. He highlighted verse five, “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? Jesus is not here, but has risen.*” As we go verse-by-verse through this chapter, we repeat verse six and continue through verse 12.

Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. Luke 24:6-12

Prayer: Thank you, God, that the power of Scripture is not dependent on the interpretation of it through a sermon. Your Word is a lamp unto our feet. May the following subordinate words, be **your** words, not my own. Amen

Fred Craddock says, “To be a good Christian witness, we must activate the recognition of what Jesus said. Sometimes our eyes are opened to what God has done, once we remember that God had said it would be so. By remembering, we are inspired to carry on in faith. It’s AFTER the women recall what Jesus said, they went back to the apostles. It’s AFTER we recall promises like, ‘I will be with you and the waters will not overwhelm you’ we say YES! That’s true! It’s true in my experience. I can own that verse, that promise, that joy!”

We don’t always remember, though. That’s what the apostle’s faced. What we face when we try coping with this broken, divided and murderous world. When we forget, we doubt our faith and wonder if there’s more.

Suppose, yesterday, you went downtown to the farmer’s market. You wanted to check out the local vendor’s goods. But, frankly you’re not impressed with the vegetables on display. You know it’s early in the season, so you ask the vendor, “Is there any more?” They may reply, a phrase you’ve heard from many stores, “What you see is all there is.” Really? That could be said to mean a lot of things. Let’s consider that theologically. What we see may... or may not be all there is.

Often, with God, there's more than meets the eye. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can see the work of an invisible God when scales fall off of blind eyes. We can see what was not apparent before. At first the apostles didn't see, rather doubted. As Luke records it, when the women heard from the angel they remembered what had been told to them and returned to the apostles, BUT ***“these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”*** Other translations describe the phrase “idle tale” as: “empty talk,” or “a silly story,” or “fairy tale”, or “utter nonsense.”

The apostles didn't believe a word of it; they thought they were making it all up. They may have waffled between doubt and the possibility of it being true, but the text says that they didn't believe the ladies. Although some commentaries say things like they doubted the women because women, back then, weren't as valued. I don't buy that for a minute. If it were men reporting back to the apostles, I am sure the response would've been the same. The women were not errand runners for apostles; they were apostles. Their story, their witness, was valid and surely valued; it just defied logic. It sounded thrilling and mysterious, but very hard to fathom.

Sometimes God surprises us despite our doubt and logic. “It is not logic that guides our beliefs. Sometimes, people won't risk leaving the tomb of logical certainty, even though it's empty...” Yet, this is exactly where the Easter message begins its work, by challenging our logic and our certainties. It invites us to get out of the tomb and pursue “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” The Easter message questions, “Really? How can you be sure that death is the end? Yes, death is real, but is it the final word?”

God's ways can't be confined to logic. His ways are above our ways. There are many things that extend beyond our wonder or intellect. Suppose you could do brain surgery, investigate the two hemispheres of the brain with its four lobes, and do a CAT scan. But, could you *prove* that someone had a single thought? No! Does that mean that they haven't thought anything because you couldn't scientifically measure it? Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Seeing, really seeing deeply, is more than a mental endeavor. It's a gift from above.

You're worshiping today in faith and witness because God has been good to you; God has blessed you. The risen Christ has already appeared to you, in some way or another. You have remembered what you were taught and realized God makes a difference in your life. You have direction because of Jesus' teachings. You have seen how God has carried you, or a loved one, through what seemed impossible. You may still be waiting to see God manifested, but God will give you what you need to see.

In college, God opened my eyes to seeing differently. Previously, I had tried to emphasize living out faith with actions, but God used a peer named Gene who expanded my witness. Gene Brooks helped me articulate the mystery of faith and attest to this amazing gift of Christ resurrected. Gene and I played a few consecutive weeks of intramurals, and after each game we would go to supper

together. So, around the dinner table at Presbyterian College, he stretched me to say what I believed about Jesus.

It was uncomfortable being verbally tested by someone of an evangelical background, but it strengthened my witness. From our conversations, I learned the value of Christians claiming God's peace in our upside-down world. There's power in the counter-cultural witness because of Jesus dying for us on the cross. He is no longer hanging, nor wrapped in linens. He lives! Our story lives, too! Sharing it provides a living hope to the hopeless. We can always grow in telling our experience, even if our stories may seem like idle tales.

What the apostles experienced that 1st Easter morning involved a mixture of faith and faithlessness. Does God think it is a problem to have faith and doubt coexist in our experience? I remember a time many years ago, while on our church mission trip to Tijuana, Mexico with youth and adults. We faced some doubt. We were trying to provide for the children in the local church. Annie Ayres and I had instructed a couple dozen of our team to go out into neighborhoods two by two, door to door to invite children to our Vacation Bible School. (Admittedly, it made some squeamish!) After Monday's respectable attendance, we thought these personal invitations might simply add a few more to our next days. We'll, we were certainly wrong! We more than tripled our attendance the next afternoon! Frankly, we doubted our food supply would last.

We questioned if we'd done the right thing. Although we wanted to believe, we doubted if God would supply our needs. God surprisingly provided! We second guessed our faith. Was that a miracle? Ironically, the lesson was on the multiplication of loaves and fish! God helped us keep pouring out goldfish crackers. Every child got enough and we had some leftover. The snacks just multiplied right before our eyes!

Faith and doubt coexist throughout the Gospels, too. One time, Jesus questioned a boy's father. Jesus was about to heal the boy, and the father says such an honest statement " I believe, help my unbelief" (Mk. 9:21-24). Notice that even if we have doubt, Jesus doesn't judge. There's no condemning, rather constant companionship and good gifts. Jesus hung in there with the man, validating the boy, the man, and the faith he did have.

And, we see from today's text, Jesus hangs in there, even as the apostles doubt. Peter, earlier in his discipleship is described as having "little faith" (Mt. 14: 28-31). We see here, again, "*he went home, amazed at what had happened.*" Peter simply went home amazed, not saying a word to anyone. God would keep working on Peter's ability to witness. Ultimately, Jesus declared Peter would be the very one on whom God would build his Church. Later, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, testifies what he knew about God. He preached about it in the first sermon recorded in Acts. In part, Peter says, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. He poured out his Holy Spirit that you both see and hear." Those who welcomed Peter's message were baptized and in that one day about 3,000 came to believe!

Furthermore, 1 Peter 1 encourages us to have a living hope, despite the broken, divided, and murderous world around us. Peter wrote, “Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

So, to conclude, what points could strengthen your witness? In summary:

1. Remembering what God said, we become a better witness.
2. Sometimes God surprises us, despite our doubt.
3. We can always grow in our spiritual witness.
4. Even if we doubt, God can use us in mighty ways.

Can I get an Amen? Amen!