

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Walking Witnesses: The First Bible”

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Luke 24:25-27

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We continue in this series “Walking Witnesses,” this close look at the final chapter of Luke’s Gospel, all about Christ’s resurrection and the immediate aftermath. And it’s all been about how the gospel, the good news, of Christ’s resurrection didn’t stay put. It was on the move from the get-go.

Last week we looked at the beginning of a story known as the Road to Emmaus, with two disciples, the very same day Christ rose from the dead, just later in the day, were walking along heading away from Jerusalem, and Jesus comes up next to them, but they don’t recognize him. And they start talking, even testifying. Ironically they were testifying about Jesus, about what they had hoped Jesus might be, what he might become, namely, the Messiah, and they were doing so to Jesus himself, but they didn’t know that.

Regardless, we pick up in this story after the disciples have testified of their hopes in the Messiah, and then Jesus responds. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

²⁵ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Holy, Risen Lord, we praise you for your testimony, and for how Scripture declares your gospel on every page. Open our ears, O God, and by your Spirit, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

You could say that the first Bible I ever got was one of those Bibles geared toward children, with a walking, talking Bible named Psalty that would appear throughout. Any of y’all know what I’m talking about? I don’t even know if this is still around. It was a walking, talking blue Bible named Psalty, and that’s “Psalty” not like a salt shaker, by Psalty spelled like a psalm, with a ps- at the beginning of it. “Psalty the Singing Songbook” he was called, and there were kids’ programs and singalongs and all that stuff.

And apparently at some point they made a Bible for kids with some branding from Psalty. Every so often if you’d be going through this Bible, Psalty would show up in an insert within the text. It’d be something like, if you were reading the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, and Jesus is saying, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also,” you know “turn the other cheek,” that saying, then maybe next to it Psalty might show up in an insert box saying, “Has anyone ever been mean to you? Did you want to be mean back? What Jesus is saying here is that we shouldn’t be mean back, but forgive and turn the other cheek.” You know, good lessons. Good ways to apply Christ’s teachings in a manner appropriate for children.

I do wonder sometimes, if I ever tracked down one of the Bibles again—and I don't know maybe we have one of them around here somewhere—just how Psalty handles some of the more challenging even disturbing parts of Scripture. Like just a few chapters into the Bible, after the Garden of Eden and that going horribly wrong, then things just keep getting worse, and then at one point God just says, “Enough! We're starting over! Big flood now. Noah, put some animals on a boat to make sure they're preserved. You can take your family too. Everyone else, you're gone.” Not sure how Psalty handles that story. Or a few others that come to mind.

We can talk about commercialized religious merchandise for kids and the gray area that occupies another time, but as far as Psalty reinforcing the Sermon on the Mount, forgiveness, love, kindness to strangers, faithfulness to God, hey good stuff.

And if those Bibles are still around, or you know whatever other children's Bibles are out there trying to do the same thing, present Scripture and the good news of Christ in an appropriate way for kids, then hey, may that be the first encounter with Scripture that young people have. It's a good thing.

The way we encounter Scripture is a complicated thing, isn't it?

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus encountered it—in a way they didn't expect. After they had testified about their hopes for the Messiah, their hopes for who Jesus might be, Jesus—remember, they don't recognize him yet—then kind of bites their heads off a bit, doesn't he?

He says, “Oh, how foolish you are”—wonderful thing to hear from some random dude you just met on the road—“and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” To which their thoughts had to have been something like, “A) Who in the world do you think you are? What gave you the nerve? And B) Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? No, it wasn't necessary. That's nonsense. What are you talking about?”

You see the notion that Jesus, specifically *as the Messiah*, should suffer, really wasn't an easily accepted thing. Jesus talked about it plenty. He told them on a number of occasions that he would be handed over, that he would be crucified, and that on the third day, he would rise again. He told them. And that's kind of the point. Even after he told them, they weren't expecting it. It was so nonsensical 1) to expect someone to come back from the dead, especially after the Romans got done with them, 2) to expect the Messiah, the anointed deliverer of Israel, not to triumph over the Romans and over all the religious hypocrisy that was going around, but to suffer and die at their hands. That didn't compute. It's not what they or anyone else was expecting.

And why? Well because that's not what you would expect if you read the Hebrew Scriptures. Try this test. Imagine you never knew anything about the Bible or Jesus. Nothing. And then you read the Old Testament, and then you're asked, “What's the next chapter?” No one, I mean no one, would say, “Oh well this carpenter's son from Galilee will go around preaching and healing, but when he comes to Jerusalem, he'll tick off the wrong people and be crucified. And three days later, he'll rise from the dead. Oh and by the way, he's the Messiah and the Son of God.” Any honest reading of the Old Testament, without the benefit of knowing what came next, wouldn't expect it.

And that's what makes what Jesus says next so astounding. In v. 27, he says, “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” Do you realize what that's claiming? It's claiming that the entire narrative about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, about Moses and the

Israelites coming out of Egypt, about the covenant and Sinai and the law, about the judges and the kings, and the temple and the civil war and the exile and the return, and all the prophets calling the people to a renewed faith, in all of it, Jesus is showing these two disciples all the things about himself.

You ever read a mystery novel or watch a movie with a great twist at the end? What makes for a good twist? I'm talking *The Sixth Sense* or *The Usual Suspects* kind of twist. What makes for a good twist? Is it just something random changing things up at the end? No. That feels cheap. It's like saying, "Well, then they woke up. It was all a dream. Surprise!" That's not a good twist. No, the best twists are the ones that are completely unexpected. But once they come, and you start thinking about it, you realize it's been in front of you the entire time.

Like in *The Sixth Sense*, I think I can spoil it, it's been almost twenty-five years, Bruce Willis is dead the whole time. But when you first find out, you think, whoa wait a minute. No, that can't be. He was talking to his wife at dinner. No, he really didn't. But then he was sitting there with the so-and-so and they were talking. No, actually not. And when you go back, you realize that no one acknowledges or speaks to him the whole time except for the kid who sees dead people. It was right there, but you never saw it coming.

That's got to be something of what this exchange between Jesus and his disciples had to have been like. He's going back through Scripture, saying, "Here's the Messiah. Here's the Messiah. Here's how all of that points to these events that just happened," and it's like they're thinking, "I never saw it coming, but there it was."

It was the first time the Bible, well really the Old Testament if we want to get technical, was taught and presented in this way, in a way that revealed that Jesus, as the Messiah, as the Christ, is precisely what all the longings of the Scriptures were pointing to.

Here's the cool thing, though. Jesus doesn't just come out of the gates and preach at them. Does he just walk up to them and say, "Boom, I'm Jesus! Now sit down you're getting some preaching!" No. He walks with them first.

Approaching Scripture is a complicated thing, isn't it. Been a topic of no shortage of disagreement, even fighting, and for a long time too. There's some myth out there, and it's kind of about the Bible, it's kind of about the church, that there's this magical time way back when, when the Bible was settled and everyone in the church agreed about it, and if only we could get back to that time when faith was pure and the church was pure and everything was pure, then we can get back to faith. You know when that was? Never.

But obviously Scripture's important, centrally important in the life of the church. Not just a collection of ancient documents. Some might think of it that way, but that's not what it means in the church. We consider it the Word of God, a special, specific way God has chosen by his Spirit to reveal himself and, more to the point, reveal how God's plan and purpose for us, for the world, finds its fulfilment in this Jesus. That's huge. That's news that has to be shared.

Here's the thing though. You ever try to go up to somebody on the street and say, "Hey, you look like you could use some Bible teaching"? No one ever try that? Probably for the best. Most likely you'd do more harm than good. Why? Because we shouldn't talk to people about the Bible, about Jesus? No. But because trying to invoke Scripture's authority with someone for whom Scripture currently holds no authority usually does not bring about a positive exchange. Just yelling "You need to read your Bible" to someone for whom the Bible has no meaning or context or significance usually turns people off.

Now don't get me wrong. There are instances when the message of "You need to read your Bible" is a needed one. Like if the only encounter with Scripture we have is the memory verse at the top of a devotional—y'all know what I'm talking about, the verse or two at the top, and then someone else's reflection on them in a few paragraphs underneath—nothing wrong with those. Those can be great. But if that's the only exposure that we who claim to follow Jesus ever regularly get with Scripture, then yeah, the message is "You need to read your Bible." And if that applies to you today, and you don't know where to start, let's talk. It's why I love our Disciple classes here and our Bible Studies. We're going in deep on reading and knowing Scripture.

But to someone who hasn't been at all curious or interested in Scripture, just saying "Hey, read your Bible," really doesn't hold a lot of meaning. And, as we're talking in this series about witnessing, it usually doesn't make for a very good witness to the good news. Feels more shame-y than anything else.

But what if the Bible wasn't always the first time somebody reads Scripture? You ever hear that old saying: "Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some person ever reads"? A lot of truth in that.

Come to think of it, my first Bible might not have been that old Psalty Bible after all. It might have been my mother caring for me, praying for me, praying with me. It might have been my grandmother, who was a minister herself, but I knew her as Nana.

Come to think of it, the first Bible those disciples on the road to Damascus read that day might not have been the Scripture lesson they got, but rather Christ himself, the Word of God made flesh, now risen, walking with them.

So come to think of it, I wonder whose first Bible you might be. Who could you be walking with?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.