

“Walking Witnesses: Flesh and Blood”

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Luke 24:36-43

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We continue our walk, if you will, through this series “Walking Witnesses,” a close look at the resurrection stories in the final chapter of the Gospel of Luke. What we’ve found each week is not just a calling to go forth proclaiming the good news of Jesus—that’s part of it, certainly—but maybe more surprising has been the ways it seems Luke is saying the good news will spread. And it’s not just by standing on a street corner and shouting it. How do we bear witness to the gospel of Christ’s resurrection? How are our lives taken up into Christ’s risen life?

Last week, Rev. Janna finished up our look at the story known as the Road to Emmaus, exploring how something as seemingly regular as sharing a meal can be a powerful place of witness. We leave the road to Emmaus this week, and find the disciples back in Jerusalem. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence. Luke 24:36-43

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

Almighty God, we praise you and thank you for this testimony of your presence, your flesh and blood presence among your disciples. We pray that this same witness will guide us to be a living, breathing testimony to how your Spirit can redeem, transform, and sanctify us, bringing about a new creation for those who are in your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Well folks, the results are in. Some of you may have caught the minor headline last week—and I say minor because it felt more obvious and procedural than anything else—but as of last week, the public health emergency caused by Covid-19 is now officially over. This is not intended to be a comment on the pandemic but rather on how things have changed and what lessons could be learned. And in that regard, the results are in.

Not telling you anything you don’t already know, but obviously we’ve learned that in a lot of ways, person-to-person connection or in-person presence just isn’t as important as we thought it to be. We see it all over the place. Businesses have learned that you don’t necessarily need to

send so-and-so on that cross-country or even international trip to meet with such-and-such. A video conference works just fine. The entertainment industry has learned that connection of whatever media, be it theater, live music, comedy, whatever it is, needs to be linked closely with home streaming. The Broadway smash hit *Hamilton* came out over Disney Plus almost three years ago—just as good as being there in person. And as anyone who went to the Taylor Swift shows in Nashville last weekend can attest, would've been just as good at home on the screen.

Even live sports enthusiasts have to admit that with capacity for large screens and surround sound, all within the comfort of your own home, does the trick pretty well. Last Fall's Alabama game, if you were watching it at home with one of those setups, then you already know, no different than if you were there in the stadium.

Anybody believe any of that? You might've been on board with the video conference instead of a business trip, maybe even with watching home streaming instead of live music, but at the Alabama game, you knew that was a step too far.

No, obviously one of the lessons learned is the central, indispensable premium placed on in-person presence, and we see that all around. So the shock that perhaps you felt for a moment at even the suggestion that we can just go full-on digital and full-on remote via a screen when it comes to business or entertainment or live sports, I hope you feel the same shock and disbelief at the following.

The church has learned that the work of mission and witness can be more efficiently done by other means, so across the board, churches are scrapping notions of in-person service and relationship, instead seeing that the more efficient and cost-effective methods of witness will be in the production of made-for-the-screen worship experiences, interactive apps for your phone, and downloadable tracts about Jesus and the message of Scripture. And when it comes to missions and evangelism, just not worth the cost anymore of sending missionaries anymore, so instead we'll send boxes of Bibles and airdrop pamphlets to saturate a market and see how things play out from there.

I'm of course being facetious. But if maybe you detected a hint of truth in the absurdity of it all, you're not alone. As much as we would readily recognize the importance, the premium of in-person connection in the work and mission of the church, we might in practice think, you know, maybe it is just as good from home. And also in practice, it's not like we've renounced technology. We have a website, we have social media accounts, we have livestreaming, we have these scabby-looking things in the bulletin called QR codes to sign up for stuff. But can we recognize and embrace the potential benefit and reach of such tools, without jettisoning this central aspect of the witness of the church, that of flesh and blood?

Flesh and blood, right in front of you, is a big part of what we read about a moment ago. Last week, we wrapped up the story of the Road to Emmaus, with the two disciples hurrying back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples that they had encountered Christ risen, as they were walking along the road, and when they had broken bread, they realized it was Jesus himself in front of them.

It's not like there's a break in the story, so I'm imagining these disciples running back however far it was from where they were on the road back to Jerusalem; they rush into where the rest of the disciples were, and you know how you talk when you're out of breath and excited: "We just saw / Jesus / on the road / we didn't recognize him / until he broke / a piece of bread / and then / he disappeared." And the others are like "What?"

Then just as they're talking about all this, Jesus appears among them, and that's where we picked up today. And the disciples, even with the scene at the empty tomb, even with the testimony from the Road to Emmaus, they get kind of spooked. Because remember, as far as the timeline goes, depending on how far the Emmaus disciples were from Jerusalem, and how fast they could run, this is still probably either very late in the evening on the same day Christ rose from the dead, or early the next morning. This is all still very fresh, very new, and maybe somewhat frightening.

So they react like I suspect we all would. They think they've seen a ghost. Something like an Obi-Wan Kenobi. You know in Star Wars. Obi Wan Kenobi dies in the first one, but then he shows up in the other movies with something like a blue light around him, and that tells us he's just a ghost or something. Something like that. That's what they think.

But Jesus is having none of that. He's no ghost. He's flesh and blood. He says, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And he extends his hands and feet. It's implied that they touched them. If he were a ghost, presumably there'd be nothing to touch.

Yet even then, they had a hard time believing, so he asks "Have you anything to eat?" and they give him some fish. I guess that was something like the Casper test or the Slimer test. You know, Casper the Friendly Ghost? Slimer, from Ghostbusters? Am I skewing too 80's in my references today? Point is, if Casper and Slimer tried to eat something, what happened to it? Food just fell to the ground in a mess. Jesus ate something. He's flesh and blood.

And that's the witness here. This was no spiritual or ethereal appearance. It was flesh and blood. Something was different. He apparently could appear or disappear, but it wasn't just some supernatural plane he was existing on. He was *there*, with them, again. Despite everything that

had happened, despite everything that had terrified and horrified them about the events three days prior, he was *there*, in the flesh. And that *proved* something, the truth the witness of the message he proclaimed, that he embodied, was true because of this risen body before them that day.

What if that's something we miss when it comes to mission, when it comes to witness? By that I mean, what if we miss the witness, the good news, of Christ, risen, in the flesh, ushering in a new kingdom, a new creation, and instead focus almost exclusively on an understanding of our souls jettisoning off to heaven when we die? Not disputing the soul, by the way, or life everlasting, but there does seem to be something missing, a disconnect between the good news of the resurrection, of Christ right there. This gospel, it seems, is meant to be embodied, lived out, flesh and blood, right there in front of you. Jesus seems to be doubling down, overemphasizing to his disciples that he is indeed there with them. "I'm here," he's saying, "I'm not a ghost. Touch me and see." What could be more reassuring? No matter what terrifying things had happened, no matter how hopeless or scary things had seemed, he's saying "I'm here." Did all the troubles of the world suddenly dissolve around the disciples? No. In fact they probably intensified after that point. But what was different, then in that moment? "I'm here."

I remember years ago when I was little. We'd go to the beach around Wilmington, NC, where my mom is from. And I was old enough to go out a bit further into the water, but perhaps not a strong enough swimmer to really hold my own. And this is the Atlantic, so under the right conditions, the waves can get a few feet high. And one day I remember swimming out to a sandbar, a good bit out from shore. But then on the way back in, I got caught right in the zone where the waves were breaking, and it was starting to overwhelm me. I was getting scared. I couldn't seem to get out of those breakers. With a tired voice, probably not much louder than just a raised voice, cried out "Help," but I'm sure it didn't carry that far. But then I felt a hand on my shoulder, an arm under my arm, and a voice saying, "I'm here," and guided me back to shore. Did the waves suddenly get smaller then? No. But what was different? "I'm here."

How many of us remember being scared as a kid, maybe in the dark, maybe of the monsters in the closet? And then mom comes in, or dad comes in, or that trusted loved one comes in. What was most reassuring in that moment? Was it when they explained, "You know, it's quite improbable that there's actually a monster in the closet. First that presupposes that monsters exist, and then that somehow said monster could have gotten into your closet undetected until now"? Would that be reassuring? Probably not. What actually was? "I'm here. I'm here."

There's something different about the witness of flesh and blood, of presence, of being with someone. Christ didn't show up in that room as Casper the Friendly Ghost; he said, "Touch me and see," and he offers out his hands and his feet.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Be the hands and feet of Christ?” It’s a good phrase. Usually, it’s a reference to letting our hands do the work that Christ would do, of healing, of washing, of humble service, to letting our feet go in the paths of Christ, to the ends of the earth, walking alongside the downtrodden and outcast. And that’s absolutely true. Let us be the hands and feet of Christ precisely in the way.

But I wonder if we shortchange it too. Christ showed his disciples his hands and his feet, and that was the proof that his resurrection was the real thing, that this was a new creation, a new kingdom being ushered in. Something was different. What if, in some way, we are to be Christ’s hands and feet in *that* sense? That in our lives, in our presence, in our witness, in our flesh and blood there is the unmistakable testimony that something different is at hand, that there is a new creation, a new kingdom unfolding. It’s a kingdom defined by presence, by flesh and blood testimony, and in every changed heart and transformed life, there’s witness that the very power that raised Jesus from the dead is just as much at work now as it was then.

Have you ever thought of it that way? That your very life, your presence in another person’s life, as a mother, maybe, as a parent, as a child, as a friend, as a colleague, could be the testimony someone sees, the proof perhaps, that a different power is at work within the world.

As the hands and feet of Christ, what are you proof of?

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