

Tuesday, April 15, 2018

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You are witnesses to these things

The Presbyterian Church of Leonia

10:30am

Acts 2:24 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

Luke 24:36-48 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

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. 44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things.

Good Morning. Thank you for inviting me to worship and to preach here at The Presbyterian Church of Leonia. I was so delighted to hear from Rev. Dr. Fowler. Leah and I actually first met in an introduction to preaching class in Atlanta, GA almost 20 years ago. It was a blessing to reconnect. I am keeping her family and her in prayer during their travels. I am also grateful to Fumio Ito, Renee Guerrero Harris, Patricia Major, Cynthia Callahan, Laura Collins, Hyune Kune Shim, Yukiko Aoki, Judy Nyirongo, Anne Stebbins, Pete Shanno, Nicole or Cory Lehnbeuter, Llesli Gonzalez-Chand, Linda McGarry and everyone who has helped make worship possible today. I am truly happy and grateful to be with all of you, my sisters and brothers at The Presbyterian Church of Leonia.

Will you join with me in prayer?

O God, We give you thanks for Leonia church, and we pray for Leah, her family, and all of those we are missing this morning.

We also come to worship you, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of

our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

As you may have seen from the back of your order of worship today, I teach worship and preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary. And I live in New York. But before I ended up on the East Coast, I was born in Jackson, Mississippi. Have any of you been to the South? Well, Mississippi is not a destination state. The Asian population there is 1.1%. When I was growing up, it was less than 1%. So, when people find out that I'm from Mississippi, they always wonder how my family got there.

My parents are immigrants from Taiwan. My mother was born in China. Her family moved to Taiwan when the Communist Revolution began, around 1946. My father was born and raised in Chiayi, a small Taiwanese village. They met in Ames, Iowa, however, when my dad was a Ph.D. student at Iowa State University. They moved to Mississippi because my dad's first

teaching job was at Jackson State University, a historically-black college and university in the state capital of Mississippi - Jackson.

That is the short version of a much longer story.

In a much longer version, I could say more about how my mother's family had to leave an infant brother in China during the Communist Revolution because he was too ill to travel by boat to Taiwan. China closed the borders before my grandmother could return and fetch him. He became a cook with limited literacy, while my mother's other siblings raised or born in Taiwan landed jobs in US technology. They all eventually reunited in the US after my younger uncle was grown. Now they all live near one another in California.

I could mention how my father grew up without shoes until he was twelve. His dad died when he was a teenager, leaving him to look after his mother, three younger siblings, and a meager family rice farm. He came to this country with \$500 borrowed. In a couple of months, he found an apartment, bought a car, and enrolled in a Masters degree program at Truman State University

in Missouri, formerly called Northeast Missouri State. Later, he pursued a Phd. in Educational Psychology at Iowa State. There, he met my mother through her eldest brother, who was also at Iowa State studying business. He had invited his sister to visit the campus from Canada, where she had at first emigrated. And I've already mentioned the rest of the story.

The longer version of my life story helps you recognize who I am. It's not enough for me to show up. Things become more interesting when I tell you more details. Just like knowing that Rev. Dr. Fowler and I took preaching class together may make me seem more familiar. Of course Leah and I aren't relatives. But she is my sister in Christ.

All of you have life stories, related to your family, the church, and other loved ones more extraordinary than what I have shared. I was listening to sermons from previous weeks here, and I heard Leah recall stories about seed words, the transportation of Jesus, and a chaplain who catches people in the

pain after gun violence. Who we are now bears witness to all kinds of life stories. All we have to do is show and tell.

In today's passage from Luke, Jesus shows himself and tells life stories to help the disciples recognize him.

Earlier in this chapter of Luke, Jesus appears to two disciples as they walk to a village called Emmaus (24:13). Yet they fail to recognize him. And when he asks why they seem so troubled, they lament about the crucifixion.

In 24:26, Jesus reminds them that the crucifixion was a necessary sacrifice for the Messiah, the savior of all people. He refers back to Moses and the prophets to make the point clear. Jesus tells a life story. He also tells a family story that they share as Jewish people. It's similar to an immigrant story, because the Israelites left their home country to build new lives in new lands. And God comes to earth as Jesus in order to bring new life in the resurrection. Jesus shows who he is and shares his story, so that the disciples can recognize him. But as soon as they do, Jesus vanishes (24:31).

Lucky for us, in our passage this morning, Jesus reappears. The two disciples from the walk to Emmaus spread the news to the other disciples that Jesus is risen. Yet folks are confused, and as they are discussing it, out of nowhere, Jesus appears declaring, “Peace be with you.” Stunned even more, they think they are seeing a ghost.

Yet a twist happens. Asking them why they fear and doubt, Jesus holds out his hands. He says, “Look at my hands and feet. It’s me. Touch me and see. A ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones.” The disciples are still shocked. So, Jesus tries again. “Do you have anything to eat?” He asks. They offer fish. Notice here that his request refers to a miracle they performed way back in Luke 9, feeding the five thousand with loaves and fish. Even a simple request from Jesus has a longer story behind it. Jesus wants to remind the disciples who they are. He takes a few bites, and again appeals to their shared life story, their shared family story, beginning with Moses, the prophets, and the psalms

so that they eventually come to recognize him as the Messiah, the savior of God's people.

Jesus shows and tells.

The disciples might be frightened and not believe it is him at first. But Jesus believes in them. He knows that if they do what he asks, if they just open their eyes and see, open their ears and listen, reach out their hands and touch not only his body but also his wounds, remember that they are his disciples and serve him - even if doing so doesn't amount to much more than offering a piece of broiled fish to a ghost - their fear will give way to the peace and presence of God. They hear Jesus. And they encounter him. They rediscover Christ's call to live as witnesses to the things of God again.

Now we aren't Christ, especially not me. But as a church, we do embody him. And in the lives that we show and the stories that we tell, especially those in which the hand of God was clearly acting - abiding by an infant brother left behind, helping a shoeless boy build a family and life far from

home, blessing the preaching voice of a young woman who would become the pastor of this church, we spread the good news of the resurrection and respond to the faith of Jesus in us.

Brothers and sisters, there's more to the story of when Leah and I took preaching together. At the start of the semester, at the beginning of class someone came to the doorway and said a plane had struck the World Trade Center. We thought it was a propellor plane and finished the lesson. But when we went to the student lounge, we were horrified. And despite the fact that life has been deadlier and deadlier ever since, God has given Leah to you and you to her as mutual signs of resurrection hope.

It's a hope that we read about in Luke, and it's a hope restated in today's verse from Acts:

24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

When unbelievable death happens, like September 11th or the death of Jesus, God gives us incomprehensible life. God

freed Jesus from death, and the resurrected Jesus comes to the disciples and us by showing and telling his life, so that we can witness to the everlasting love and mercy of God for all people.

And our witness becomes more real the closer we listen to Jesus, the clearer we perceive his presence, the further we reach for him as he invited the disciples to do, the more we feed his wounded body that should be dead.

And we do those things as a church. Here's also where Acts is illuminating. It not only restates the message of Luke. Acts shows what Luke tells. Acts shows the earliest churches sharing their wealth and possessions, praying, baptizing, healing, celebrating the Lord's Supper. They welcomed strangers, even ones that they feared, and gave generously of what they had. They also suffered harassment, imprisonment, beatings, and even death.

A lot of what they did roots what we do now in The Presbyterian Church of Leonia. But we do it differently and distinctly for our time and place...in other forms like clearing Overpeck Creek of debris, Alcoholics Anonymous, The Japanese Children's Workshop,

and speaking a variety of languages, and more. That's why our stories are so important. Jesus's story becomes ours, and our stories become his. We bear witness to the things of God by being who we fully are in God and by embodying who we could never really be - the Messiah, by showing and telling the new life offered in Christ's resurrected life.