

“Can I Get a Witness?”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Acts 3:12-19
Luke 24:36b-48

Just like last week, this week Jesus appears again to his disciples, showing his hands and feet, offering them to touch, to show that he is not a ghost. Here in a scene that seems to be repeated in the gospels, Jesus tells the disciples, again, “Peace be with you.”

Here is how Luke describes the disciples: startled and terrified.

But after Jesus shows them his wounds, Luke tells us that “in their joy,” the disciples “were disbelieving and still wondering.” Gosh, if our congregation left Sunday worship in joy, disbelieving and still wondering, I would say that is a pretty good Sunday. I figure that if we have some disbelief, but still some wonder, something tugs, even entices us, to think about God and the curious mystery surrounding such holy presence. If all our thoughts about God are neatly wrapped up into a tidy, sensible package, where is the wonder? Where is the surprise?

I suspect we will be well primed for some joy, disbelief, and wonder when we gather again-- assuming public health conditions will be safe enough-- for outdoor worship on May 23, which is Pentecost Sunday. After what will have been 14 months of virtual worship, which has had some surprising moments of holiness and amazing music, blended with the disembodied efforts at togetherness mediated through technology, I can only imagine what delight we will have in praising God as one in body and voice. We’ve probably all fantasized about what we long to enjoy once it is safe again: maybe it is a meal with friends in a restaurant; maybe it is a vacation, or a return to visit family and friends in your homeland. Maybe it’s as simple as having a friend over to play in your home. I wonder what pieces of social awkwardness we will need to overcome before our muscle memory kicks in to remind us what it’s like to be together.

Overcoming death? Well, that’s awkward. That takes an adjusting of assumptions and expectations. Okay, sure. Jesus DID tell the disciples, over, and over, and over again that he would die and would rise again. But though they were with him through his preaching and teaching, his trial and death, and probably at this point more than one resurrection appearance, it’s still just too big a leap for them.

So, Jesus does something really ordinary. He asks them if they have any food. And they give him some broiled fish to eat. Now, some would say that Luke includes this point to prove to his audience that Jesus wasn’t a ghost. Ghosts, we presume, don’t need to, and probably can’t, eat.

But I think there's something even more in that. In Bible Study on Saturday, we were discussing the difficulty of showing physical intimacy with friends and family and church when we've been socially distant. Michael Hinton mentioned that in Japan, people don't touch much anyway, so they're accustomed to expressing affection without hugs and kisses and handshakes. Mel chimed in that Koreans are typically more reserved with physical affection as well, and also with phrases like, "I love you?" So, how do people express their love and care for one another? I asked. Mel said, "You ask them if they've eaten."

And so, I can see this simple meal-- broiled fish-- carries with it for the disciples and for Jesus the power of a long embrace, the proclamation of "I love you." After that, their minds are open, and these dense disciples can finally understand the scriptures and the truths that Jesus has been trying to share all this time with them.

After that, *they* become the witnesses. They become the ones who must tell this incredible story to people who won't-- for the most part-- believe them. We see this happen in Acts. Peter has just healed a man with a serious disability, at the Temple gate. Those praying there-- especially the religious leaders-- want to know what has happened. Peter tells the story of Jesus, announcing "To this we are witnesses." The passage goes on to say that the religious leaders don't believe him. It will take many more tries, before they are believed.

After three weeks of testimony in the trial of Derek Chauvin, for the killing of George Floyd, we have heard from many different witnesses. Some will be believed, others will not. This week, the jury should announce their verdict.

We focus on the faith and the disbelief of the disciples. But it occurs to me just how much faith Jesus had in the disciples, when he kept telling them the story of who he is and what he came to do. And even in their disbelief, he kept *relying* on them to be his witnesses. And when they actually do become witnesses to Jesus, they similarly face crowds that don't believe them. Some, in fact, were executed for their teachings, as Jesus was.

We don't have it so hard, do we? It's different, telling the story of who Jesus is, in a country where historically our religion has enjoyed for centuries the privilege of the majority. Although, a Gallup poll published last month tells us the story is changing: just 47% of people in this country now belong to any religious congregation.

The truth is, we are becoming witnesses to a story that is becoming weird again, rather than normative. But when *normal* becomes accepting another mass shooting, ceaseless accounts of racial profiling, and the looming disaster of global warming, please: tell me the weird story. Tell me of life after death. Tell me there is a way toward our redemption, a way back to one another after we've done harm. Tell me about a God who gives us a way back after we have failed. Tell me about radical inclusivity. Tell me about love. That's a weird story, yeah, but it's a story I want to hear.

We are so lucky today to have as our witnesses the Alleluia Sound and Good Vibrations youth choirs. It takes more than a little courage to not just tell the good news of our faith, but to sing it!