

Copyright Geist Christian Church, April 14, 2024

Sermon Title: Witnesses

Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor, Mud Creek Campus

Text: [Luke 24:36-49](#)

Email: [Ryan Hazen](#)

[Watch Service](#)



“And that’s the way it is—April 14, 2024.” If Walter Cronkite were preaching today, he might end his sermon that way, just as he ended his news broadcasts as anchor for the *CBS Evening News* from 1962 to 1981. What I never knew or, perhaps once knew and had forgotten (which is much more common these days), is that Walter Cronkite did not sign off this way from every broadcast. Keeping to strict standards of objective journalism, he omitted the phrase “and that’s the way it is” on the nights that he ended the broadcast with an opinion piece or his commentary. In no way did he want his opinion or a commentary to be construed as fact.¹

Cronkite, early in his career, changed the way news was reported. He became one of the first to report the news from the site of the news rather than from a studio. In the 1960s and 1970s, he was voted as “the most trusted man in America” for his unbiased reporting of important news, such as the Vietnam War, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the Watergate scandal. When the time came for Cronkite to retire in 1981, another up-and-coming eyewitness news reporter, Dan Rather, was tapped to fill Cronkite’s shoes.

Both Cronkite and Rather reported like witnesses to the event. Their reporting style gave credibility to the story they were telling. It was part of what made CBS number one in evening news among the three networks for many years in a row. (Yes, children, in the old days, there were only three channels AND—here’s the wild part—we had to get up to change the channel between the three.) The eyewitness nature of the news did the unthinkable when it increased the evening news program from 15 to 30 minutes in length. Even today, one local television station has branded its news program as Eyewitness News to give credibility to its reporting. Just this week, the *NBC Nightly News* had Lester Holt reporting on the solar eclipse live from Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Eyewitness, on-the-scene reporting provides accountability to that which is being reported.

¹ Information on Walter Cronkite from Wikipedia biography article. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Cronkite

Today's scripture, like last week's with Thomas, has to do with those who witnessed Jesus after his resurrection but before his ascension into heaven. We have much to learn from these early witnesses. While the resurrection was wonderful, Jesus' message for them and for us is that it's not a place to get stuck. As we'll see, Jesus needs to prod his disciples a bit. It's not enough to proclaim, "Christ is risen!" and be done with it. At some point the disciples are going to have to move from the event of the resurrection itself to sharing what it means in their life.

When we picked up the story this morning, Cleopas and his companion are telling the other disciples how Jesus appeared to them on the road to Emmaus. Just then, Jesus, once again, shows up out of nowhere, interrupting their conversation. "Peace be with you," (Luke 24:36b) he says. They see him, they hear his voice, but they don't recognize him. It says that they "thought that they were seeing a ghost." They know Jesus was crucified, had died, and was buried. They had heard reports from the women but called it an "idle tale," which sometimes gets translated "garbage." They know dead men don't come back to life. This can only be a ghost, a spirit without a body. The tomb is open, but their minds are closed.

They are continuing to live, think, and understand in the usual human categories. They have separated divinity and humanity, heaven and earth. Like them, whenever we make that separation, we close our minds; we deny ourselves the resurrected life for which Christ died, and we lose our ability to recognize holiness in one another and in ourselves.

With Jesus' resurrection, God shatters human categories of who God is, where God's life and energy are to be found, and how God works in this world. Resurrected life can never be comprehended, contained, or controlled by human thought or understanding. Jesus' resurrection compels us to step outside our usual human understandings of reality and enter the divine reality.

For the disciples, that new reality begins with touching and seeing—flesh and bones, hands and feet—and giving Jesus broiled fish to eat. Jesus said to his disciples, "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" (Luke 24:39). Then he showed them his hands and his feet. After this, he ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence. Even the eating a piece of fish is to show them that he is not a ghost; ghosts don't need to eat. Flesh and bones, hands and feet, and broiled fish are the things of creation, the natural order. Jesus is real.

For the longest time, Jesus told his disciples to keep quiet about his identity. On numerous occasions, upon witnessing a miracle, Jesus asked witnesses to tell no one. Largely, that was because they didn't yet understand what would happen. In these post-resurrection stories, however, like our scripture today, Jesus has changed his tune, and he is now deputizing those around him as witnesses. Verse 48 of our reading is about as direct as one can get: "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48).

Notice that Jesus does NOT say to the disciples, “Please be witnesses.” He also doesn’t say, “Consider being witnesses if you have time.” Rather, it is, “You are witnesses of these things.” As it turns out, witnessing is not voluntary but a state of being. I suspect that for many of us, hearing that we are witnesses is not necessarily good news. Witnessing is a loaded word in religious contexts. At one point in my Christian journey, to go witnessing meant hitting the streets with Christian literature to distribute to people walking by and being willing to share the story of the gospel with them.

I think I was soured on the idea of witnessing because of one particular experience of my childhood. One year, I must have been in the 5th or 6th grade, I was invited to a vacation Bible school program at a friend’s church. After some scary preaching early in the week about where I would end up if didn’t take Jesus into my heart, Friday marked the culmination of the program. With our teachers, we went out in the neighborhood with flyers and knocked on doors to pass them out. For the longest time after that, I believed that I wasn’t a good Christian if I wasn’t accosting strangers to ask about their relationship with Jesus. In case you were wondering, we usually end our Vacation Bible School programs with a picnic.

I thought that being a witness meant that I had to know the Bible backward and forward and that I had to know all the answers to all the questions that someone might possibly ask of me. To be sure, grappling with the Bible is an essential part of our Christian journey of faith, but what Jesus was asking was something so much different. The Bible wasn’t even a thing yet. Today’s reading described the disciples like this: “Yet for all their joy they were still disbelieving and wondering...” (Luke 24:41a). These disciples sound a bit like us, don’t they? Joyous—but now what?

One of the problems we have when we think about what it means to discuss our faith—to witness about our faith—is that we think we need to have it all together. It’s like people who tell me they can’t join a Bible study because they don’t know that much about the Bible. That’s what a Bible study is for! We think that we must have a nice prepared presentation, that it should be filled with Bible quotes and that we should not have any questions ourselves before we’re ready to tell someone else about our faith.

None of that is true. When Jesus says, “You are witnesses of these things” and when he encourages their continuing witness, what they are witnessing to, what they are sharing, is their own stories—stories of joy and disbelief and wonder, stories of a Jesus who is present in their lives, opening their minds and bringing a bit of peace. Witnessing is different for every person because the experience of Jesus is different for every person.

That’s what we are invited to share with others—our experience of God in Jesus, a Jesus who brings some peace, some joy, who opens our minds and causes us to wonder. And we can share our own grappling with disbelief and doubt along the way. I am not able to explain everything about my faith because so much of it is a mystery to me. I can read scholars and very smart people and parrot their philosophy of language, their biblical hermeneutics based in historical-critical analysis, their existential philosophy, their psychoanalytic psychology, and their process theology, but that is not what 99.9% of the people are interested in hearing.

What most people want to know is whether a relationship with Jesus, whether the Christian journey of faith, whether being part of a Jesus community—a church—makes any difference in life. Is there really some joy and peace to be found along the way? Is being a part of a community of faith where people pray for you important to you? Is faith, hope, and love really central to your life? I think every person here and every person online has a story about these things, so the answer is yes, yes, and yes.

Ultimately, the question is, “What is your personal experience with the risen Christ?” Some have had lightning-bolt experiences; some have had gentle tugs in this direction or that. Some may feel like you are waiting for that personal experience. All of those answers are OK. Sometimes—often times—experiencing the risen Christ happens when we least expect it, and many times, it happens while we look past it or take it for granted.

I understand that how we witness a risen Christ is as unique as we are different. The disciples hiding behind locked doors on Easter afternoon and a week later did not all go about their witnessing responsibilities in the same way. In fact, as I’ve grown in my faith, I’ve come to believe and understand that being a witness to the risen Christ very rarely involves words—hardly ever involves words—but always involves actions. I’ve come to understand that being a witness to the risen Christ means living out your life so that others suspect just by watching that you love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and that you love your neighbor as yourself.

Put another way, you must live your life in such a way that others look at you and see God’s grace and love at work in you. Your purpose in life, in everything you do, is to remember Christ’s call to the disciples, and to you—you are witnesses. You are the ones who tell the story of Christ’s grace and love. That’s true in the way you raise your kids and the way you love your family. That’s true in the way you work and the way you volunteer. That’s true in how you treat your neighbors. That’s true in the way you decide to use the things God has given you, how you use your talents. It’s true in how you spend your money, how you share your resources. That’s true in most every choice that you make.

It means that in this world that so often feels like Good Friday, I’m supposed to witness to Easter with my life. I’m supposed to witness that the destruction and hate and fear of the world do not win and that God has created new life where there was no hope and grace where there was none. That’s my calling. And that’s yours, too. Because that’s THE calling, that’s THE job of every Christian. It’s having your lip service match your life service. Being a witness means that it becomes your identity—an identifier of who you are and whose you are. To pick up on a famous quote by Maya Angelou, I would add, when people tell you who they are, wait and watch but when people show you who they are, believe them.²

I’m reporting live from Geist Christian Church, where a body of believers are gathered together. They gather each week around a table to remember Christ, to sing praises, to pray, to hear a word of teaching. These acts that they call worship seem to inspire them so that they go into the world to witness to a risen Christ in the way they live their very lives. And that’s the way it is—April 14, 2024.

² <https://www.facebook.com/MayaAngelou/photos/a.485196574795/10160829364929796/?type=3>