

You Are My Witnesses
Pastor Barnes
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Texts: Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:44-53

May God's continued presence in our Ascended Lord and the Gift of the Holy Spirit - continue to guide and keep you - even when the road ahead is neither clear nor easily seen to be safe.

No one likes to go first! We have visited many churches either on vacation or when I was filling in for a pastor on leave. The thing I hear quite often when it comes to communion: "I don't want to be first!", or "I don't know what is expected, or how they do communion and what if I do it wrong!?" This is true not just for my family...but it is also true of visitors coming to worship. It isn't just because we are Lutheran that the first few pews are usually open!

Visitors want to watch and see before they must move and do...if they will at all! Which is why I often will make sure I have connected, if possible, before worship with our visitors...No one likes to have everyone turn around to "see" who is in their midst...Even worse..."please stand and tell us a little bit about yourself!"

The same goes for responsibilities. "Don't mind being a part of something...just don't put me in charge!" So many times, beyond count, sitting in a congregational annual meeting - so says someone: "We need a person to be in charge of..." Silence invades the room; or sometimes an individual can't stand it, and even though they have often volunteered - their hand goes up!

I know, a strange way to start out a sermon! But maybe, not so much...The disciples are right there with us! Even after Jesus appears and says: you will be given the Holy Spirit to be able to go out and witness.

Acts 1:6: "So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when YOU will restore the kingdom to Israel?'

Vs. 8: But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (home) in all Judea (across the street) and Samaria (those unlike you) and to the ends of the earth (mission work?)." I'm sure I would be in the same boat!

Jesus: Wait! Where are you going? What's the plan? You have so much more authority and image than I do!

Witness: you mean, this won't happen on its own? I don't want to get in front of people! When are you coming back?

I find comfort in the fact that Jesus' disciples and followers forever since then...are called because of their hearts, not how many "degree" initials are after their names or have everything memorized!

SO: How many Post Resurrection Appearances? At least 12 in the 50 days! Some you know, others would be less known.

Here are a few: Emmaus; Mary outside the tomb; behind locked doors for fear of the Jews; and the one most everyone knows...the fishing trip, where Jesus calls them to shore and talks to Peter about tending, feeding and caring for the sheep.

Why? Because Jesus the incarnation of God has the indefatigable, undeniable, infinite love for His children. A love that was to be fully exemplified in the life, death and resurrection of His only Son...so that we could/would continue to build that relationship. To be a witness.

I remember holding the hands of my 3 children. Tiny hands reaching up for mine as we walked - maybe down a trail - in a big store - just to be close. Somewhere, somehow, those tiny hands no longer reached for mine, but became independent. I am grateful that we talk and discuss, but I have to admit, I miss those tiny hands.

Jesus was God's hands holding ours. Now, we can connect with others and read scripture, and pray. But as you have heard: "God's Work our Hands." - the ELCA outreach statement.

Easter has come to a close, at least on the calendar! Today, Luke tells a story, the only one of the four Gospels to tell the story, that is strange! Jesus - the one who talked to us in words that we could understand. And told us unforgettable stories, The Jesus who touched real people and changed their lives for the better, healing their diseases and helping them get back on their feet, this same Jesus is now taken up to heaven.

The truth about the Ascension, is the kind of truth you desperately need to know on those days when the sky turns dark and storm clouds gather, or the earth shifts under you and you have that feeling that you are sinking into chaos, and you can do nothing about it.

Hmmmm...maybe it is about our world as it sits right now!? God is STILL holding our "tiny" hands and is with us! Jesus the Christ is the one from Nazareth. Who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly, is nothing less than God with us. Jesus Christ in what he says and what he does is the full truth about God. Jesus is more than a wise person who points us toward God. As we say when we repeat the Creed on Sunday morning: He is sitting "at the right hand of God the Father almighty." He is on the throne next to the Father.

Any power and might, any glory and sovereignty that God has, Jesus, the crucified one has. He reigns! There is no God behind the God we see in Christ. Jesus is not just the positive, compassionate side of the face of God, God with a good publicity coach. Jesus is God. Jesus sits at the right hand of God and shares in everything God has, is, and does.

So, the Resurrected Christ appears and appears to remind the disciples and US, that God still holds our tiny hand. that We Can Do THIS! At some point, we have to move to the "front row." At some point, we will have to stand upon the claim of Jesus name!

A story: A tragedy - you name the city. A senseless act of gun violence. The Mayor showed up at the scene. The last thing people wanted was for the Mayor to show up. Figuring another political opportunity. Some bad things were shouted.

But the mayor continued, "My little brother was gunned down when he was only 14. That was the worst thing that ever happened to me in my life. It changed everything. IN fact, the reasons I ran for office and wanted to be in public service was my pitiful attempt to bring some good out of the terrible wrong that was done."

Suddenly the crowd grew quiet. They began to realize he had been there.

Take that as a kind of parable about the significance of the Ascension of Jesus. The one who sits upon the throne of God, knows and understands...He has been with us. The crucified one, the one who was crucified in great part because he stood with victims, the one who fully

knows what it is to be a victim, now reigns on behalf of the victims. And if you happen to be a victim, it's sure good to know who's in charge. That heavenly hand is offered! And because we cannot know the future, we cannot control it BUT because of the Ascension of Christ, We CAN know that the future is in God's hands.

My hope in this whole long sermon, is that: As Jesus says: "You are my witnesses," may not be quite so scary. That Jesus came to "show and tell" praying, crying, laughing and dying with us.

But more! To teach why we are here in the first place. God still searches for our "tiny hands" to hold as we witness to the love, grace and forgiveness that make us "new" every morning.

What's that old hymn: "Morning by morning, new mercies I see", You might recognize the Title: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness". The verse ends: "new mercies I see; all I have needed thy HAND hath provided; great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me."

A reality check (and a little humor) can alert us to at least TWO fallacies that allow us to complicate matters.

First: we tend to believe that because we have heard the words, we have absorbed the message. Let's be honest. We absorb the part of the message that fits with what we are already doing or thinking; We do not absorb the part that appears completely alien or that will mean we actually have to change and risk a new way that seems dangerous or potentially messy.

Second: When things are not going the way we want them to be going, as in worship, maybe changing the worship setting will do it! Rather than, changing ourselves will fix things! Isn't that usually the first solution?

We change jobs; we change doctors; we switch our membership to another church. We believe the solution resides with someone else, rather than with our own commitment to be in a lively, unfolding relationship with God. That is why it does not surprise me, when the disciples are watching Jesus ascending to heaven...said: will YOU now restore Israel?

We don't need to worry about the outcome...God will take your tiny hand if we take it out of our "pockets!"

Remember that in Acts, the witnessing begins at home....and maybe eventually "to the ends of the earth."

Angels had to remind the disciples to stop staring up to heaven and move ahead...The Spirit will guide.

I will admit, that I still have a lot to learn about allowing my own discipleship to emerge into the light of God's transforming Spirit.

So, let's hold hands and learn together!