

Easter 3-B
April 15, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

Now and then, hearing the gospel reading is a little like walking into the middle of a movie and today is one of those days. The reading we heard from Luke comes more or less as a sequel to the much more familiar story of the Road to Emmaus.

In that story, that occurs the evening of the first Easter, the risen Jesus walks along a road toward the village of Emmaus with two men, discussing the events in Jerusalem -- actually the arrest and death and resurrection of Jesus himself. But they do not recognize Jesus until they stop for a meal and he is wonderfully revealed to them in the breaking of the bread. It is one of the loveliest stories of the whole Easter season.

Where we pick it up today, the men are talking with some others about this experience of meeting Jesus when Jesus turns up again, saying, "Peace be with you." They don't feel peaceful at all! They are terrified, thinking he is a ghost.

Jesus then asks them to touch him, just to be sure he isn't a ghost, then eats a piece of fish—convincing evidence that he really is alive.

This is a familiar pattern in a lot of the post-resurrection stories. Jesus isn't at first recognized, people are frightened when he appears, and then he says or does something that convinces them that he is alive and among them, often explaining how scripture makes this quite clear.

Then we get to the next step: I find the last sentence of this part of the reading the most interesting. Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things."

A witness is someone who has seen or experienced something and then can relate that story to others. It is a way of truth-telling. Mostly we think about being a witness in the context of a court case. A witness testifies to the truth.

In this case a witness spreads the good news that Jesus is alive and among them. All of those people who were among those who saw him, heard him, even touched him, were witnesses. They have been a part of these events with Jesus that offered hope in the midst of grief -- pointed his followers to the future.

“Witnessing” is also a word that we sometimes use in the church in the context of faith-sharing. Sometimes the word is testimony. Either of those words can strike fear into the hearts of Episcopalians, most likely because they are often used by faith traditions that seem a bit more zealous than we are. Most of the time we opt for the other way of showing that we are believers – living our lives in a way that lines up with what our faith tradition teaches us – what our baptismal promises call us to do.

But I think it’s worth exploring the idea of being a witness. – actually saying something directly about experiencing the power of God in our daily lives. Maybe it will make us less nervous.

Sometimes when we have an important experience, we really want to tell other people about it. It can be a good experience or a bad one. For instance, when our car broke down on a lonely road late on a winter night in 1968 (an epic winter) and a stranger stopped and offered to take us to the next town, I couldn’t stop telling that story. This was in the days before cell phones, so we might have been out in the cold for hours, forty miles from town and with a worried family waiting for us. The goodness of this man, who knew how lightly traveled this road was, was such a

gift to us. The story was a testimony to the goodness of him, and of humanity. But in another way, it was a God story as well. A story of protection – of receiving the kindness of a stranger.

Certainly we have faith stories that are even more powerful than my traveling story. Or perhaps a faith story that is gentle, or puzzling, healing or inspiring. Over years I've heard many of these – sometimes from someone sitting on the other side of a card table at a guild meeting here at the cathedral, or visiting in a hospital hallway, or planning the funeral of a family member, or at the grocery store or just hanging out in my office.

These stories have been gifts, because they reveal the faith life of another and also inspire my life of faith.

Sometimes we have opportunities for this kind of sharing at retreats or in small groups, but most of the time it just isn't our practice. And in a way that's too bad – even for us introverts. Just as we need those stories from scripture about how Jesus enters our lives, we also need to hear how you and I experience the risen Jesus in our every-day lives. How we are transformed by that love.

Interestingly. (and a few hours after I finished the first draft of this sermon on Friday) I got an e-mail from Church Publishing – our Episcopal publishing house, about a new book: "Speaking our Faith." I don't know if this was product placement based on today's gospel, or whether it was just good timing.

A few years ago a United Church of Christ minister named Lillian Daniel wrote a book "Tell it Like it Is," about reclaiming testimony or witness in her tradition. (I need to add here that she was at the time the pastor of a very progressive Protestant church in New Haven, Connecticut, a college town, the home of Yale University.)

They set aside a Lenten season to invite the folks at their church to share their stories of experiencing the presence of God. As I understand it, it was a process that was pretty precise – a clear method for the way the stories were structured and shared. But the results were encouraging. She said their leadership was strengthened, that the sharing fostered closer relationships in the congregation and members felt it drew them closer to God.

There are some simple ways to do this, too. Families might take a moment at the dinner table to share where they met God that day. That becomes easier with practice for sure and is a wonderful way with youngsters to begin to notice the God's presence at school, among friends, in nature – wherever life takes us.

Just reviewing the day each night, asking that same question, is a wonderful way to end the day even if we don't share that with anyone else. Where did we meet God today? What did we learn? How were we changed?

It's a kind of consciousness- raising. A way to cultivate our consciousness of the presence of God – or of the risen Jesus in the every-day moments of our lives. A testimony to the power of the love of God that empowers us to love others.

It might sound like a radical thing to do. But the word 'radical' speaks to how we are rooted in things that are important – life giving, valuable.

You and I are witnesses to some important things. May we be bold enough to share them with grace.