

You are Witnesses
April 19, 2015
Text: Luke 24:36b-48
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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It was a beautiful Spring morning almost exactly twenty years ago...a Monday if I remember right. I was driving to the office, like almost every other day and I was less than a block from the parking garage. Entering the last intersection I had to cross, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something coming at me...from the wrong direction on a one way street...On instinct I hit the gas...and the truck, instead of slamming directly into my door, and presumably, me, smashed into the back door and rear quarter panel...Amazingly, the car would still drive, thank you Swedish engineering...so I moved out of the intersection and pulled over.

I've got to admit that it shook me up. I wasn't hurt but I was in that place your mind goes to in the wake of a surprising, unsettling event, maybe you've had one of those moments too... one of those times when you can't quite yet believe that what happened really happened...and your mind doesn't quite know what to do, it's receiving so many conflicting messages...Yay, you're not dead...Holy Cow, you could have been dead...What the heck, somebody hit my car...wait, what hit my car...Oh, great, now I'm going to be late...

It's confusing...it's kind of amazing...and maybe...if I admit it...there was a little bit of joy in the midst of it...to still be breathing.

On a much, much more profound scale, we can imagine it was something like that for the disciples on that Easter Day. We can know it because Luke tells us that's the way it was...First, a little framing—in Luke's strand of memory, no one encounters Jesus at the tomb—but the two Mary's, Joanna and their friends encounter two angels who tell them of the resurrection. The women rush back to the disciples who don't believe them. The scene then shifts to the edge of town to the Emmaus Road where Jesus appears to two disciples who are fleeing the city and is only recognized when he breaks bread with them...That is followed immediately by this scene—where Jesus appears, offers them peace, and a chance to confirm that it is

him, even shares a meal with them...and Luke tells us, "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering"....that word translated as wondering is probably best translated amazed. They are joyful and disbelieving and amazed....and who wouldn't be?

People just don't come back from the dead every day...that's not our experience, right? Not surprisingly, the risen Christ seems to understand this...so he calmly reminds them that everything that happened was what he told them would happen...and he gives them their calling...to proclaim the good news of repentance and forgiveness in his name...

And then he says what is perhaps the most important thing he will say to them..."You are witnesses of these things."

Witnesses...oh yeah...back to that street in Houston 20 years ago...

So the moment the man who was driving the truck that mangled my little Volvo walked over to me...I noticed for the first time that two other cars had pulled over. And the drivers of both cars were walking towards us. As they approached they both handed both of us their business cards. It seems they had been right behind me and had seen it all...and they were willing to be witnesses that my light was green and that he had indeed backed the wrong way on a one way street right into the intersection and quite a clip...

Under the name of the man on the first card it said...Assistant United States Attorney...and under the second...Agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation...On that day I learned that it was good to have an office next to the federal courthouse. I've no doubt they would have been the best courtroom witnesses of what happened between the two cars. They would be excellent reporters of the facts.

It think that's what most of us think of when we think of witnesses isn't it...the person who can describe what happened in the greatest detail.

But I'm not sure that's what Jesus is talking about when he tells the disciples...you are witnesses. I'm not sure he's so concerned that they get all of the facts right.

That's a good thing I suppose, since the four strands of memory that make up our four gospels remember very different details about Jesus' resurrection and what happened in these post-resurrection appearances.

But is it any wonder? They weren't disinterested passersby who happen to see Jesus appear after everyone knows he's dead...they are his friends...his students...his followers...his family...and when he appears they are amazed and disbelieving in the midst of their joy. And yet they become, he tells them...the witnesses...to the victory of life over death...of love over hate...of grace over vengeance....they...the tearful, confused, amazed disciples make it possible for us to live in Resurrection hope today...

I wonder...what if Jesus is suggesting to us that unlike in an accident report, the best witnesses are those who are amazed and disbelieving and at least a little bit joyful?

Let's let you be the judge...

People told Bob that it was a hopeless situation. People had been saying **that** since before they hired Bob to try and fix things. No, some of the money folks said...they had made a good go of things, but there just wasn't enough money to keep the doors open...in fact, there wasn't enough to even keep the doors. The foreclosure notice had been posted. But then again, these had been hard times for everyone...there were lots of foreclosure notices...all over town and all over the country people were losing their homes and their businesses. But Bob just couldn't let it go. Like a real life George Bailey from *It's A Wonderful Life*, he went on a campaign like no one had ever seen...he cajoled every person he could...those he saw every week, those he had never met...He gave speeches, he cast a vision for their community if they could save this struggling concern...and it was going down to the wire...and around 11 pm on that night..the night before the bank's deadline...a dazed and disbelieving and incredibly joyful Bob announced that they had done it...They had saved it from the gavel...The unthinkable had happened. Hope that was dead was alive again....

Sounds unbelievable, right?

If Bob's perhaps not the best witness, then maybe you'll like Luis. To most who knew about him, Luis was a tragic statistic waiting to happen. He was sucked into the black hole of gang involvement before he was even a teenager. By the time he hit the 9th grade, the fighting began. That's what little guys...Luis is not a big fella...that's what little guys in the gangs have to

do he was told...fight...and before too long..Luis is expelled. No school in the area will take him. And then he learns...he, barely more than a boy himself, is going to be a father.

And it flips a switch somewhere in his soul. He can't let his life continue to spiral out of control if someone else is depending on him.

So, in desperation, he walks into another school. He's so far behind though...there is so much he doesn't know...they decide to try him out...only two classes...even though he needs 20 more classes to get his diploma. But more than a school, he finds people that for the first time are willing to listen...have the time to mentor him and counsel him and hold him accountable in ways his overcrowded public school teachers just couldn't...He goes from failing everything...to making A's...he finds interest in technology and math...and he soars...eventually becoming a teaching assistant in his final year in school... And then, the unthinkable...

His teacher brings him the news...news that the Luis of just 2 years before would never believe...the boy who was supposed to end up dead in an alley after a fight...has a real chance at a real life...he is admitted to college in automotive technology...He can't believe it...he is amazed and befuddled and of course...joyful...he will be able to take care of his family!

Again...ridiculous right? the stuff of fairy tales...

Well, then how about Fannie? Fannie May Gosnell will turn 79 later this year. Just over ten years ago she lost her husband of almost 50 years. On a cool April night, Fannie May smothered the fire in the old fireplace and headed off to bed. In the middle of the night the scream of a smoke detector roused her...the room was filled with smoke. She came out of her bedroom and was confronted with flames that were consuming her front room...the room where her wedding photos and mementos and others markers of a lifetime of memories with her beloved were kept...she scrambled out with her Bible and her life...and watched as the firefighters tried unsuccessfully to save her home. It was damaged beyond repair.

Fannie May wasn't giving up...but she had to admit...almost everything about her old life was gone now. She had no insurance, was living on a very meagre fixed income in tiny Jonesborough, Tennessee...and other than her neighbor's' guest bedrooms, she had no place to HAVE a life.

And then some folks from her church told her they had talked to some of their friends...and maybe they could do something for her. In the first week of January this year...that something was a new house right where her old one had been...no defective fireplace this time...but even better...no mortgage.

There's video footage of Fannie May walking through her house when it was almost finished...and you can see...she is amazed...it's beyond anything she believed possible..and the joy on her face as she expresses her gratitude for her new life...is downright Easter-y.

So what do you think? All these disbelieving, amazed and joyful witnesses to new life...from the disciples to Fannie May... are you convinced...can life come from death, does love ultimately win?

Oh...there's just one more thing I forgot to tell you...

You are witnesses of these things...

No, seriously...YOU are all witnesses of these things...

The building that Bob, Rev. Robert Logan rallied the folks to save from foreclosure...is the one you are sitting in.¹

That school that Luis walked into, it's the El Cuarto Ano high school in Chicago operated by Association House...an organization this church directly assists in recent years out of its mission budget...²

And those friends the folks from Fannie May's church called...they were the long standing friends of this congregation at Appalachia Service Project...and her home was built by ASP volunteers and their friends.³

By living your faith and joining your story with the stories of these amazed, disbelieving, joyful people from those confused disciples in Jerusalem all the way up to Fannie in Tennessee, you are witnesses of their Resurrection hope...

¹ Story found in "Cooperville Cathedral: The Story Of Northminster Presbyterian Church 50th Anniversary"

² Story found on website of Association House: <http://www.associationhouse.org/home/about-us/accomplishments/success-stories/>

³ Story found at various sources including: <http://www.johnsoncitypress.com/article/123271/strangers-neighbors-help-jonesborough-woman-rebuild-home-after-fire> and <http://youtu.be/HB93u2J7OjY>.

in your life, your ministry, your faith...which perhaps by the grace of God and the guidance of the spirit will soon become our lives, our ministries, our faith...

YOU are witnesses of these things...

Life wins....love wins...Resurrection hope is real...Christ is indeed alive in Us.

WE are witnesses of these things...thanks be to God.