

“WITNESSES”

Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24: 36-53
May 21, 2023 ~ Ascension Sunday
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When I was a kid, I used to love those puzzles that involved spotting hidden objects in a picture. And games of “I spy,” too. I enjoyed the challenge of looking and searching, and of course the little thrill of finding. Our daughters liked these kinds of activities as well, and were quite good at them. The “Where’s Waldo?” books and puzzles were right up their alley. So it was probably inevitable that we would eventually convert them both to birdwatching (in spite of the fact that they laughed at first).

Birdwatching is more or less “Where’s Waldo” or “I spy,” played in the real world, in nature, with objects that fly around and often hide amongst leaves and brush and grasses. You have to learn what to look for, and where to look, and *how* to look. You have to pay attention. It takes some patience, and practice, and persistence. It really helps, especially when you’re learning, to have people with more experience guide you, and to go with a companion who might spot a bird you missed. Sometimes, and with some birds, it’s pretty easy. More often, it’s a challenge. But there’s also that little thrill of surprise and joy when you spot the first rose-breasted grosbeak of the spring, or a scarlet tanager, or any bird that you’ve not seen before. Then suddenly it feels less like a game and more like being witness to a little miracle of beauty. And you look around for somebody to tell, somebody to show, somebody to share the moment with.

What we’re asked to do as Jesus’ disciples is harder than birdwatching, and more momentous than a game. But it does involve some of the same kinds of challenges... and sometimes a similar moment of recognition, surprise and joy.

“You are witnesses” he says to his disciples.

A witness is a person who has seen something.

A witness in a courtroom is there to tell what he or she saw – not something they were told or learned about or surmised, but only what they *saw*. In contemporary Christian lingo, we associate being a “witness” with knocking on doors, asking people if they are “saved,” and telling them they need Jesus (and perhaps being a bit obnoxious). But the core meaning of the word is simply about seeing.

The question is always, “what did the witness see?” Were they paying attention? Looking carefully? Taking their time? Noticing details? Did they understand what they were seeing?

“You are witnesses of these things,” Jesus says. He’s speaking about his life, his ministry of healing and teaching, his suffering and death, and his resurrection. The disciples to whom he’s speaking were there to see all of that, and here they’ve just seen the risen Jesus – alive again after dying, scars and all – eat a piece of fish just like any other flesh and blood human being.

“You are witnesses,” he says, after he reminds them of all the things he said to them, of the way he interpreted the meaning of his life in the context of the promises of the scriptures they all knew – the law, the prophets, the psalms.

It feels a little bit of an act of faith on Jesus’ part to say to these disciples “you are witnesses,” because they *don’t* seem to have grasped very well what they have seen in Jesus. They may have believed or hoped that he was the promised Messiah but they didn’t listen too closely when he tried to tell them what that meant. They saw him die, and now they see him alive and he has to persuade them he’s not a ghost. They don’t know whether to be terrified or filled with joy.

But still, Jesus says to them, “You are witnesses.” These are the witnesses Jesus leaves, and they are enough. They have to be. So, Luke tells us, he opens “their minds to understand the scriptures.” He helps them see. And he promises that if they just sit tight, God’s Spirit, as promised, will come to them, and they will be “clothed with power,” presumably to bear witness to what they have witnessed, and to “proclaim repentance and forgiveness” in Jesus’ name.

As I think you know, the same writer produced both the gospel of Luke –about Jesus’ birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection – and the book of Acts –about the birth and growth of the church. Here at the very end of the gospel, is the turning point, the place where Luke shifts from part one of his story to part two. With a blessing, Jesus hands the mantle over to his followers, who (at least as it seems to us) barely have a clue as to what’s being asked of them. We might wonder why he didn’t remain with them, or at least stay a little longer, until they had a better grasp on their role, and maybe a strategic plan. But maybe Jesus’ departure was necessary so that his followers could be open to the Spirit’s coming and ready to accept a role in this new thing that was about to emerge and grow and spread... which came to be called the church.

“You are witnesses,” Jesus said to them.

Here’s something I know to be true about everything Jesus said, every one of his words recorded by the gospel writers: it was not just for those men and women (and children, too, for all we know) who were standing there at Bethany, or in any of the other places where Jesus walked and taught. Luke and the other gospel writers wrote them down so their communities, and the next generation, and the next, and all of those who’d come after, including us, could hear them. When Jesus says, “you are witnesses,” he’s talking to us, too.

We haven't seen, firsthand, the same thing that those first disciples saw – Jesus healing a paralyzed man, feeding 5000 people with one lunch, calming a rough sea, eating with sinners – although those stories live in our hearts and imaginations. Our role is the same, though, only perhaps a little more challenging: to learn to see Jesus in our lives and in our world, and then to bear witness. But first, you have to learn what to look for, and where to look, and *how* to look. You have to pay attention. It takes some patience, and practice, and persistence. It really helps, especially when you're learning, to have people with more experience guide you, and to go with companions who can help you see.

Every day, in every joyful, and sorrowful, and ordinary circumstance, we are challenged with the question: where is Jesus in this?

I feel fortunate, and I hope you do, too, to have companions who both help me to see Jesus, and show Jesus' love and compassion to me.

I thought I'd share some ways I saw Jesus this week:

-I saw Jesus in all the folks from our church who surrounded a grieving family with caring and hospitality.

-I saw Jesus as we remembered the life of a husband, father, and grandfather who rarely attended church but displayed every one of the fruits of the spirit in the way he lived.

-I saw Jesus in a deacon who's dedicated herself to seeing that a member of her parish gets the care she needs.

-I saw Jesus in the commitment of our session members, in the inspired ideas that emerged in a planning meeting, in the faithful sharing of the prayers of our community.

-I saw Jesus in the story of a man who after 30 years in prison is celebrating one year of freedom and in his mentor who told me about this man's courage and persistence in navigating a changed world.

-I saw Jesus in the affirmation and support our Art Festival has given to artists and poets in our community – I've heard over and over how much it means to them that we do this.

-I see Jesus in this congregation's expansive vision of what faith is about – arts as well as Bible study, earth care as well as worship, questions as well as beliefs, justice as well as kindness... willingness to honor many ways of being faithful.

I saw Jesus in news from the wider world, too:

-I read about how members of a group called Border Kindness leave food, water, and first aid supplies in desert areas where many migrants cross the US/Mexico border.

-I heard a poet talk about his book in which he writes with devastating honesty about painful things in his life, things many readers will relate to.

-I learned about some white families choosing to sell their homes for much less than market value to black and indigenous families... their own sacrificial commitment to reparations.

-I see Jesus in so many people and groups giving of their time and energy to address problems that affect the poorest and least powerful the most: from medical debt to gun violence to poor air quality to health care access.

-I see Jesus in hurting and marginalized and threatened people who are vulnerable yet have found the courage to tell their stories and advocate for their communities.

It's not always easy to see Jesus in the people and events around us. We're busy, preoccupied with our tasks, focused on our responsibilities, stuck in our routines. Our world offers endless distractions. But our calling in the post-Ascension world is exactly that: to discern where the spirit of Jesus is alive and at work, and to ally ourselves with that work, whatever and wherever it may be. Of course I don't mean volunteering for or donating money to every single good effort we hear about – we need to be good stewards of time and resources; we need to listen closely to the Spirit's leading as we discern where we are called to use our gifts. But wherever Jesus is, we who are his people are supposed to go there, too. That's what it means to follow him. That's what it means to be the "body of Christ" in the world.

So when we see Jesus in the people and events around us, can we bear witness, by sharing what we have seen? Can we ask "what can I learn from this? How can my life reflect Jesus in a similar way?" Can we be open to changing our minds about how and where and through whom and with whom God works? Can we be in solidarity and in prayer? Can we offer encouragement? Can we do something to help? Can we go forward with just a little bit more hope and energy because of what we've witnessed? Can we gather more courage to do the right and Christ-like things in our own lives? Can we ask each other, "Where have *you* seen Jesus this week?"

Where's Jesus? Ascension Sunday offers us both the challenge of seeking and the promise of seeing. Where's Jesus? I encourage you to ask that question this week, and pay attention to where you see him, what you learn, where it takes you, how it changes you.

You are witnesses.