

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 14, 2024

ACTS 3:12-19 | PSALM 4 | 1 JOHN 3:1-17 | LUKE 24:36B-48

Every once in a while, I get an email that has just three letters in it: FYI. Whenever I get an FYI email, I always find myself wondering *Why did this person send this to me? Do I need to do anything?* Occasionally, I'll reply and ask *Do I need to change my plans or make a different decision?* The answer is almost always *Well, not really. Just information for you to be aware of.*

Sometimes the way we talk about Easter feels like one of those FYI emails.¹ *Just FYI, Christ is risen. Doesn't really change anything. Wanted to keep you in the loop.*

So instead of looking for a theme in all of our Easter readings, I thought we'd look at all of our readings with a particular question in mind. And the question I want us to be thinking about is this: *What does Easter change? What does the resurrection of Jesus make possible that wasn't possible before?*

There's a big one right at the end of today's gospel reading. St. Luke about an appearance of the risen Jesus. Jesus offers his disciples peace, shares a meal with them, and opens their minds to understand the scriptures. And this is how he ends the story. "Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.' You are witnesses of these things.'" So very clearly, Luke gives us an answer. What does Easter change? Easter makes us witnesses. But it makes us a different kind of witness than we're used to.

After all, to be a witness to something means that you saw it. You can give an account of it. What makes a witness good is that they can give an explanation of what happened. If a lawyer called a witness to the stand, and the witness said, "Well, technically I wasn't anywhere near the scene of the crime, and I didn't really see anything happen, but I could probably guess at what happened," they wouldn't be a very good witness.

And yet, this is what happens in the resurrection of Jesus. Does anyone in the gospels actually see Jesus rise from the dead? No. By the time they get there, there's just an empty tomb. They see the effects of the resurrection, they see signs of it, but do they actually see the initial event itself? No.

So why does Luke's Jesus say that the disciples that Jesus shares a meal with are witnesses?

It's because Luke has a different understanding of what it means to be a witness.² To be a witness to the resurrection does not mean that you happened to be a bystander at some historical event. It simply means that you are encountering the ongoing presence of the living God. So by sharing a meal with these disciples, the risen Jesus has made them witnesses of the resurrection. Did they see Jesus burst forth from the grave? No. But they have been gathered by the risen Jesus and sent to continue his mission. And it's the hospitality of Jesus—not the circumstances of their lives—that makes them witnesses.

¹ For example, in expressions of Christianity such as Therapeutic Moralistic Deism, Easter becomes largely superfluous and unnecessary.

² There's a good discussion of this in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 2011), 118. This story serves as a pivot between Luke, where witness is rarely mentioned, and Acts, where it's a major theme.

This is a much broader definition of witness. And it means that the communion of witnesses stretches beyond the twelve disciples. It includes women like Mary Magdalene. It includes people like St. Paul who never met Christ “in the flesh.” It includes people like Matthias who is mentioned once in the book of Acts and then never mentioned again. And it also includes all of us. By sharing a meal with us every week, the risen Jesus makes us witnesses, too. So that joined together and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can receive and continue Jesus’s mission in the world.

This is not something that we achieve for ourselves, it’s something that’s given to us. Notice how Jesus instructs his disciples. He says, “You are witnesses of these things.” You are. Not *You could be*. Not *Some of you might be*. Not *Once you complete this training course, you will be*. He says, *You are*.

It can be so easy for us to think that the real work, the real witness, the real mission is done by other people. Witness is something that eloquent and inspirational people do. Witness is something you do if you have the right experience. Witness is something that the pastor does. Or, the pastors might say, something that the bishop does. In any event, witness is something that happens out there. Other people. Other experiences. Other lives.

St. Luke reminds us in this story that witness is not something that other people do out there. It’s something that we do right here. Because the risen Jesus gathers and sends us, our lives now convey that great love of God. We are witnesses. Not just in the moments when we feel the Spirit’s power. But throughout our entire lives. So it’s not just “God’s work. Our hands.” It’s “God’s work. Our struggles. Our laments. Our successes. Our uncertainty. Our hopes.” It’s “God’s work. Our lives.”

Just by chance, I stumbled across an old Thea Bowman interview this week. This is one she gave right before she died of cancer. And the interviewer asked her where she found hope in her life. And this is what she said. “I know that God is using me in ways beyond my comprehension. God has given me the grace to see some of the seeds that I have sown bear good fruit, and I am so grateful.”³

That’s what witness is about. It’s not just that I did some project that turned out well and now I want people to come look at it and tell me I did a good job. It’s trusting God uses our lives in ways beyond our knowing. That my life, even the parts of my life that I find difficult, communicates something about the good news of Jesus’s resurrection to others. Not because I’m talented. Not because I’m a hard worker. Not because I have it altogether. But because at Christ’s table, I become his witness. And God uses our lives in ways that we can’t begin to comprehend.

So what does Easter change? Well, first and foremost, it changes us. We are tired and weary. We are excited and hopeful. We are doing okay, I guess. All of that is true, St. Luke says. But in all times and places, we are gathered and sent by the risen Jesus as witnesses of God’s great love.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ Quoted from Thea Bowman, *Sister Thea Bowman, Shooting Star: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, 1999), 132.