

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 18, 2021

ACTS 3:12-19 | PSALM 4 | 1 JOHN 3:1-7 | LUKE 24:36B-48

We heard two beautiful Easter stories today. In today's reading from Acts, we heard about a man healed through Jesus's name and the power of the resurrection. And from Luke's gospel, we heard of an appearance of the risen Christ to the disciples. These are stories of newness and healing and life and all those things we usually associate with Easter. New possibilities. New horizons. New futures.

But notice something else going on in both of these stories. Something that ties them both together. We're talking about newness of life, but not without reviewing some history along the way. After Peter heals this man, he says, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus" and "in this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer." Instead of calling people's attention to how impressive this miracle is, he refreshes people's memory of what God has done in the past. And sure enough, in Luke's resurrection account, Jesus does something similar. He doesn't just show up and announce he's back and send people out in mission. He says, "Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." If you want to understand Easter, you need to know where you came from.

This attention to history matters because it tells the disciples, the crowd, and, we're here so why not?, us what it means to be a witness.

We often think of witness as a kind of fun, uplifting word. But it's a little more complicated than that. Because to be a witness is to give an account, an explanation not just of what you've seen but also of your own actions and your own history. For the disciples who abandoned Jesus, this encounter with the risen Christ is also a reminder of their own failures and cowardice. They are moving on trying to expiate any memory of the crucifixion and their own choices surrounding it, and now Jesus is rehashing all those old wounds. And for the people Peter speaks to, it raises questions about their own perceptions of God's action. Where was I when Jesus was on trial? What was I doing? Being a witness, looking honestly at the past is difficult for them. And it probably is for us, too.

When he was four years old, the Bible translator and detective author¹ Ronald Knox was asked what his favorite activity was. Marbles? Blocks? Jump rope? He replied, "I lie awake at night and think about the past."² And though we too might like awake at night thinking about the past, we probably wouldn't count it as one of favorite activities. I can't remember where I parked my car at the grocery store half the time, but I can remember word for word conversations from years ago when I let me anger get the best of me. And those memories have a funny way of popping up at two o'clock in the morning.

And the struggle to look at the past clearly is an issue of public memory as well. Look no further than our arguments over which figures should be cast into statues and memorialized in monuments. These are not arguments about whether these statues are aesthetically pleasing³ but about whose stories they tell and how they shape public memory. We might worry that removing

¹ Fun combination.

² Quoted in Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005).

³ See Nashville's statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest for a truly horrifying example.

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statues is erasing history but their construction can also be an act of erasure.⁴ Sometimes when we try to tell the story of the past, we end up obscuring as much as we preserve.⁵

To be a witness to history and ourselves is to be confronted with things that are often quite difficult. Either because they bring things to light about ourselves that we would rather keep hidden. Or because they make us question how much of our pursuit of self-righteousness might turn out to be a lost cause.

And yet. Jesus refuses to let us merely turn away or wipe the slate clean. History can't be undone. Can't be erased. And can't be expunged. So why does Jesus call us witnesses? Not simply to make us feel guilty or to reopen old wounds or to point us to our need for grace. But because God chooses to act within history. Within lives. Within time. Within bodies. In many and various ways through the prophets and poured out in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

We know full well that we are witnesses of death. We don't need anyone to tell us that. But Jesus tells us that we are witnesses of life, too. Because whenever we encounter the world and experience the wraths and sorrows of life, we always expect for God to meet us there in the middle of everything. Even in ways that aren't completely obvious or apparent or understandable to us.

In fact, one of the things you probably notice when you hear these resurrection appearances is that people aren't quite sure exactly what's going on. Usually, the gospel writers are in full control of the narrative. But here, their grip on the story starts to slip away from them. People are encountering something that goes beyond what they have the ability to describe and comprehend. Luke even says explicitly that the disciples were afraid and had doubts. They don't even really understand what the resurrection means. But Jesus still calls them witnesses.

So becoming a witness to the resurrection isn't something that happens once you have some overwhelming experience or you feel like you have a totally coherent picture of the world, but even in the midst of our frustrations and confusion. To become a witness, you don't need to go off on some spiritual "find myself" journey and have some road to Damascus experience. All you have to do, St. Luke tells us, is live.

You, Jesus says, are witnesses. Witnesses of death and destruction and indifference. People who can look at the world and speak about it honestly. And, Jesus says, because you can see the world clearly and trust that God is present in all times, you are witnesses of the resurrection, too.

There's at least one more thing we have to say about all this. To be a witness is not to be an observer. It isn't to sort of look at the world at a distance and go, *Oh, isn't that too bad. Or Isn't that nice.* To be a witness is to bring about change. To make the resurrection of Christ and the promises of God more evident in the world we live in, particularly in situations where they don't seem immediately clear. Jesus tells us that we put flesh on the promises of God and make them tangible in the lives of our neighbors. Called, gathered, and sent by the risen Christ, we don't simply watch the world but we heal memory and redeem history.

That's who you are. Today. Right now. Just as you are. You, Jesus says, are my witnesses.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁴ Phillip Morris, "As Monuments Fall, How Does the World Reckon with a Racist Past?" *History*, July 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/confederate-monuments-fall-question-how-rewrite-history>.

⁵ For example, a statue of General Lee in Richmond, Virginia was constructed in 1890. Would its removal be an act of erasing history? Why or why not? The statue was covered in graffiti during protests in the summer of 2020. Would removing that graffiti be erasing history? Why or why not?