

You Are Witnesses of These Things

Today our gospel passage again begins with those who have known and followed Jesus as they are trying to understand what has happened since Jesus' arrest and what is now happening after his death. During the weeks between our celebration and remembrance of that first Easter morning and the time we celebrate the Pentecostal arrival of the Holy Spirit we walk through the stories of several post-resurrection appearances of the risen Jesus. While the four gospels have many interesting variations in their account of these appearances, they are absolutely consistent on one thing: no one believes the good news of Jesus' resurrection when they first hear it. No one. And that includes Jesus' own disciples, the ones who were closest to him and spent the most time with him. Despite we are told that Jesus warned them beforehand. Despite that he tried to prepare them for both the suffering and the death and that the temple would be rebuilt. They did not understand then. They seem unable to believe that the last portion—the part about being raised is also coming to pass. In fact, that level of absolute disbelief starts with the disciples. Previously in Luke's account he tells us that the disciples dismissed the testimony of the women who had been to the tomb and found it empty as an "idle tale" according to most current translations. In chapter 24 verse 11 the Greek word used—transliterated as *leros*—is the root for our English word delirious. Being delirious is to be out of touch with reality. The disciples labeled the women's report—their testimony as nonsense, as fantasy. The women they thought must be out of their minds. And really, although not a nice reaction to their witness—it probably is the expected response to such an account. After all, it is not customary for the earth to give up a living body from the grave. And testimony that it has—that one who died has actually been raised—well that kind of upsets the natural order and causes you to lose confidence in pretty much everything you thought you could count on. A saying from Benjamin Franklin which can still be heard is: "Two things are certain in this world: death and taxes." Except, according to these women, death is no longer certain—if Jesus has risen. As our passage opens, the disciples are gathered and are seem to be listening to Peter's confirmation that the tomb is now empty—but he hasn't seen the Lord. Someone besides the women have sighted Jesus—and now two who have been following Jesus but left Jerusalem in disappointment arrive back to join the twelve saying that they too have seen the Lord. He joined them on the walk to Emmaus. Although they did not immediately recognize him, when he sat with them for table fellowship—blessing the bread and giving it to them—they knew. But then he vanished. Now as they are excitedly talking about these things—Jesus appears among them saying: "Peace be with you." The response which Luke records is somewhat startling—even when Jesus is standing there among they are startled and terrified. They do not believe that he is risen, but that he is a ghost. Seeing this response, Jesus asks them: "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" To further allay their fears and doubts, he invites them to touch him, to look at the wounds in his hands and feet. He is assuring him that since he has flesh and blood, he cannot be a spirit. It seems that even after this they still are not completely convinced—Luke says that although they are joyful they were still disbelieving and still wondering. Even after all this, they don't believe, yet it is important to notice that while still disbelieving—they are at the same time joyful. This points out a truth that we often don't understand—doubt is not the opposite of faith. In

fact, doubt may be a necessary ingredient to faith. Faith, after all, by definition is trust in spite of a lack of proof. Faith is not knowledge. Faith is a more tension-filled experience. It is trusting in the truth and reality of something and acting as if that something is true even when you have no proof that it is. The faithful may have questions but still find joy and wonder in the message of good news and new life in Christ. Because, honestly, if in the face of all the death and trauma and disappointment and tragedy that colors every human life, if you then don't have at least some difficulty believing the promise that God not only raised one person, Jesus, from the dead, but also promises new life and second chances and forgiveness and grace to all, then you are probably not paying attention. The sightings of God's reign here on earth are sometimes few and far between. But these post resurrection appearances of Jesus were necessary as Jesus continued to teach and enlighten the disciples—they were still receiving remedial training—needing to be reminded of what they had already been told. In many ways we too need reminding as we turn the pages of our calendars. Life goes on. Events happen—in some of them we may see evidence of the resurrection promise, but often that takes effort and the Easter experience grows dimmer. As a result, resurrection has the tendency to be a less than present reality. It is more likely viewed as a claim about a past event or a future assurance. We are often more comfortable keeping the resurrection at a distance—either in the past or postponing its promises to the future. Sometimes it seems that the promises made to us by God are so familiar to us that we hold them far back in our head but don't actually think about them very much. So we don't act as if they are true. But if it's true that God raised Jesus from the dead...if it's true that God promises to renew the whole creation and grant us new life...if it's true that nothing—nothing we've done or has been done to us—can separate us from the love of God...if it's true that God will not turn God's back on any of us but always reaches out to us in grace, mercy, and forgiveness...if any of this—let alone all of it is true—then does that change how we live today, this week? Does faith—trusting and believing—in these promises change how we look at our relationships—our politics—our resources—our future actions? It seems that Jesus continued to remind them of what he had previously told them because it was important—not only to those gathered into that group, but for the purpose for which they have been gathered. After again opening the Scriptures to them he tells them: "You are witnesses of these things." Notice the tense of Jesus' assertion—not "you were," not "you will be," but "you are". Despite their disbelief, despite their doubts—they are still the chosen witness to these things that Jesus has said and done. Even in the midst of this mixture of joy and doubt and wonder—those men gathered there are still called to be witnesses. Jesus knows the reality of our lives—our doubts and fears as well as our moments of joy and wonder—and he still tells us "you are witnesses of these things." We are witnesses, here and now, in this moment. In this life. In our daily life. For the sake of life. Jesus reminds us of who we really are—resurrection people, resurrection witnesses. Today's reading ends with the call to be witnesses, but there is another verse. In verse 49 Jesus witnesses to what makes it possible for us to be witnesses—the promise of the Spirit. We do not witness alone, as the first resurrection tells us. We sit amongst a community of fellow believers. Our lives, on every level need the resurrection witness of others—and we need to be the witness for others.

We often feel that we can't witness—that we don't know what to say, but what we are called to do is to tell others. We tell others about things that are important to us all the time—great books or movies we have found—important family events—the list is quite long. But we can. We only have to speak of the times when we sense God at work in our lives—that is the basis of our witness. Bearing witness is simply speaking with candor, conversationally about something good that has happened in your life where you sense the hand of God at work...nothing more than that. Remember Jesus' assertion is in the present tense: "You are witnesses to these things." We are gathered, called disciples who are sent into the world to witness to the message Jesus brought. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.