



SAINT LUKE'S

"WITNESSES TO JESUS"

EASTER 3

ACTS 3:12-19

PSALM 4

1 JOHN 3:1-7

LUKE 24:36B-48

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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Jesus' resurrection is very much in the flesh. Jesus is not a ghost, although that is exactly what the disciples first think he is here. Luke spells it out: *Jesus took [the fish] and ate in their presence*. Jesus has taken all the power out of death, including fear. *Peace be with you* is his resurrection greeting. As the disciples begin to believe what they are seeing, Jesus opens their minds to understand the Scriptures. Jesus brings God's story right up to that moment, and the disciples discover that they are standing in God's present. The story did not conclude with Jesus' death. They are central to God's story going forward. *You are witnesses of these things*. Others will depend on the disciples' witness and faithfulness.

There are times that we may not want to be drafted as Jesus' witnesses. We don't always embrace the sequel to Resurrection. We'll take the good news but it can be tempting to set aside the responsibilities of baptism and the vows of faith we make. However, there is no scriptural passage I know of where Jesus offers an option of 2-tier discipleship, with exemptions from this charge: *You are witnesses of these things*.

The first disciples were not religious professionals or trained scholars. (Paul was, but Paul is not yet part of this community). Yet trained or not, ready or not, these are the ones called by Jesus to be witnesses. Being a witness is more than coming to church - though that is an essential foundation. The church is the only place where week after week we hear the gospel and receive the sacraments and we all need that. Yet the church and Jesus are not exactly the same thing. Being a

witness is following the One who gives Life to the church. As witnesses to Jesus, we are not off the hook when the institutional church shows its feet of clay. We are not off the hook even when we are disappointed by other disciples or in ourselves, or in the church leadership. In fact, it's especially then that we are called to be faithful witnesses to Jesus.

The world's model for following a path is career (from French *carrière*, meaning highway). Jesus doesn't give a career path for being a witness so it is hard to know how we are doing. But a calling is different from a career. A calling is first and foremost something – or Someone - we listen for, outwardly and inwardly.

I have just been blessed by a few days in Ravenna learning about the iconography of the early church. Early Christian arts fascinate me because of the way in which they timelessly reveal the essentials of our faith. Ravenna was at a unique intersection between what would become Eastern and Western Christianity and has some stunning 5th and 6th century mosaics. This was also a time when definitions of Jesus' human and Divine nature were still in formation.¹ If we were regular folks of Ravenna in the 5th and 6th centuries, we would not be able to read. The art that we saw in our local churches would be a critical part of our faith formation. These mosaics aren't simply beautiful decorations, they are fundamental expressions of how this early Christian community understands Jesus. One of my learnings from the early Ravenna churches, mausoleums, baptisteries and sarcophagi is that there are sheep everywhere. In one of the churches², the 12 apostles are

¹ Arianism in its various forms, and Orthodoxy

² St. Apollinare in Classe

sheep on a hillside, going up towards Jesus. Above that is an unusual Transfiguration, set in beautiful green fields. Over the altar is an enormous mosaic cross, with the head of Christ in the center. Under the arms of the Cross, Peter, James and John – present at the Transfiguration – are again represented as sheep. Early tombs frequently have on their sides a plain cross with 2 sheep drinking from the arms of the cross, being nourished by the living water flowing from it. Other mosaics show deer and doves³, drinking from bowls of water. The message everywhere is that Christ is safety, nourishment, living water and care. In churches, in mausoleums⁴, the *primary* image of Jesus is the shepherd. A young shepherd, with flowing hair, holding a slender symbol of his resurrection – a cross, held lightly in the crook of his arm – reaching out his hand to tenderly touch the head of one of his sheep. The shepherd is the voice the sheep are seeking, listening for, trusting and following. If you walked into one of these 5th or 6th century churches, baptisteries or mausoleums knowing no background, you would assume that Christ the loving shepherd is the very heart and soul of our faith and our God.

But there is more. What we see is a subversive commentary on the empire. In these mosaics, emperors and their palaces are often immortalized along with saints and the apostles.⁵ Sometimes signs of their power are in there too – a fleet of ships, for instance, in harbor outside the city.⁶ The powers of empire metaphorically or even literally look across the altar at the Christ. And high above the altar, Christ is the ruler of all, from the empty cross, by the divine hand of god. Or

³ Mausoleum of Galla Placidia: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1)

⁴ Galla Placidia

⁵ San Vitale

⁶ S. Apollinare Nuovo

Christ the ruler may be portrayed as the defenseless lamb of God, yet at the center of the cosmos.⁷ As if to say to the worshippers, there are limits to the powers that rule your present existence. There is another, greater Kingdom. Moderns might say that in this early Christian art, power and leadership are deconstructed and put together differently, in a pattern that gives new life. These possibilities continue to be life-giving for every one of us who wants to follow Jesus.

The tender shepherd of the mosaics is the same tenderness with which John writes to his church “*See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God and that is what we are*”. On the day of my confirmation at 20, my Confirmation sponsor - a young woman of my own age - wrote me a note. Always encouraging me to open up the Bible she wrote: “1 John 3:1 - look it up!” Every time I read this verse, I remember my friend’s rejoicing that the faithful witness of the Christian community on that campus had led me to commitment to Christ. They imitated Christ’s good shepherding to me: in kindness, in patience and listening to my questions and speaking about Jesus. There is no more important image of Jesus’ love for us than the good shepherd, guiding and caring for his flock. This is what our witness can imitate, both in what we say and how we say it. We don’t need to witness by arguing for Jesus as a superior moral being, a wiser teacher, more heroic than gods of other religions, but Jesus as a different kind of leader of a different kind of Kingdom. A shepherd who leads through being-with his flock, in the midst of the disciples’ daily lives and needs. When the church lives out this witness to this Jesus, by

⁷ San Vitale

genuine kindness to each other and all others, our witness becomes magnetic. This has always been true and it always will be. Loving-kindness is the most compelling witness of all.

AMEN

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