

“You Are Witnesses of These Things”

Luke 24: 13-35

Rev. Liz Miller

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One of the common side-effects of being thirty is being plugged into social media. I'm not immune. Over the last few years I have developed a co-dependent relationship with Twitter. I use it to keep it stay in touch with close personal friends like Ellen DeGeneres and Michelle Obama. I also use it to keep tabs on what other churches and other clergy are up to. This week there was a trend going around, started by a minister in New York, to write a six word faith statement. It caught my eye knowing that this is the weekend our sophomore confirmands would be away on retreat, beginning the process of writing their own faith statements. I thought a few of them might be jealous that other people across the country only have to make theirs six words long. I read a lot of these faith statements, and I was moved by exactly how much could be included in only six words.

Some of them were very steadfast and encompassed some more traditional Christian beliefs: “Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly.” “She leads me to still waters.” “Jesus loves us this I know.” “Let justice roll like the rivers.” Others spoke of a forgiving God and a faith that heals: “Painfully human, yet loved by God.” “From broken-hearted to open-hearted.” “I'm a mess. God loves me.” And still others used their six words to capture that tension so many of us hold between belief and unbelief: “Longing for community, doubting my doubt.” “Faith and doubt, shaken not stirred.” My favorite was: “Are you kidding? Okay, I'm in.” My own was “Receive grace, offer love, live discipleship.” After worship you will have to share your own six word faith statement with me. Or better yet, the next time you see one of our confirmands, share it with them.

One of the brilliant people on twitter wrote that for the Gospel lesson this week, the same one we just read in Luke 24, the six word faith statement is: “You are witnesses of these things.” This is our

third week of Easter and the third time we have read a story of Christ resurrected appearing before a group of disciples and giving them a message so it would appear that, “You are witnesses of these things” is a very appropriate, theologically sound faith statement for this passage, and perhaps for the whole of this Easter season.

That line “You are witnesses of these things” has been especially meaningful to me this week and has stuck with me. You see, the other thing I use twitter for is to stay on top of the major news headlines. Some weeks the news pieces on twitter are more in the background—I can focus on my favorite celebrities and friends, but this week was a truly outrageous news week. On the horrifying side we watched yet another school tragedy take place in Hamden. We listened to the racist remarks of an NBA owner and engaged in discussion on enduring racism in America. We worried over the 200+ Nigerian schoolgirls who have been kidnapped and whose whereabouts remain unknown. We prayed for areas hit with tornadoes and flooding.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, for outrageously awesome news, the United Church of Christ, our denomination, began a lawsuit challenging the state of North Carolina, claiming that because their current law bans clergy from officiating same-sex weddings, including possible jail time and a fine to any clergy who do perform such ceremonies, it limits our First Amendment right to freedom of religion. When that was announced on Monday, from someone with many friends and colleagues across the UCC, it was like it was The Only Thing happening that day. It was powerful. But whether you get your news on twitter or the Wall Street Journal or the Courant, it was definitely a week where we were “all witnesses of these things.” This week big things happened in our world. Events and stories made our heads turn and caused us to pause or read a bit further to find out what was going on.

We live in a time where we have constant access to international and local news and as such, we are ongoing witnesses to the lives of other people. It is easy to be lulled into the idea that as witnesses, we are passive, that all we can or should do is observe from afar.

In that same Gospel story from Luke, where we first hear “you are witnesses of these things”

we see that being a witness can mean something different than just receiving information or passively watching things happen to others. In the story, when Jesus appears to the disciples and they try to figure out what is happening and what this whole experience means for them, Jesus reminds them to pause and share a meal together. It happens twice—first at the end of a day with broken bread that Jesus first blessed, and then again when Jesus' presence startles them once more. Jesus' response to their wonder at what they are witnessing is to ask for some fish to eat. I don't think it is a coincidence that right as there is a moment where the disciples are witnessing something monumental like a resurrection, Jesus reminds them to stop processing and wondering and questions and just eat together. It's as if he is telling them that in order to be full witnesses to the Gospel, they need to first share a meal.

It's like they needed to be nourished physically, to take time out together to replenish themselves, before they could resume their role as witnesses to Jesus' miraculous return to life. It happens twice in this story, but all throughout Jesus' ministry, when you see him performing miracles or arguing with people, you almost always see him eating a meal at the same time. Some Biblical scholars have even argued that Jesus eats his way through the gospels. There is this subtle but persistent relationship between the disciples witnessing all these amazing things that Jesus is doing and at the very same time being invited to eat with him, to share in a meal. It happens so often and in too many ways for it not to be a symbol for all of us.

How does this connect to our role as 21st Century witnesses? The disciples were witnesses of the Gospel. They were witnesses to Jesus' ministry, they were witnesses to this life changing moment in history, and as witnesses they were called to respond and change their lives and go out and tell people what they had seen and experienced. There was a moment between that time when they are witnessing these things and when they are called to action. That moment is when Jesus would often, including twice that day on the Emmaus Road, ask them to share a meal with him. The meal became a transition—it moved them from passive observer to witness in action, prepared to take the next steps together.

So, today, we live in this world where we are constantly witnessing. We witness events unfold around the world—wars and natural disasters and diplomacy and all the painful ways in which people hurt one another. We are also witnesses to events of great love and caring and compassion. These are often quieter ones, but they are just as important. We are witnesses to friends visiting us when we are in the hospital, or communities coming together after violence has threatened to rip them apart. We are witnesses to people reuniting lost animals with their family and churches speaking out for justice. We are witnesses to small miracles and large acts of kindness. We also know, because we have heard from the disciples and read the Gospels that Christ has been resurrected and Christ is still in our midst. We know that God continues to move and work in the world, 2000 years later. We know that God is present in all things—good and bad—and as such we are called to be modern day witnesses to the Gospel. We are called to speak loud and far about everything we have seen and more importantly—about where we have witnessed God in those moments. We don't passively watch the news—we interpret it so that we can continue to understand who God is and how God is present in our world, in the pain and the tragedy and in the peace and the hope. Where we have seen signs of the resurrected Christ at work in our midst.

But in between that moment when we do the witness as observers and when we go out and witness to others, to spread the Good News, we are invited to share a meal together. For us, we do this by gathering around the communion table. Just as Jesus broke the bread with the disciples, we break the bread together and are reminded of God's presence. We are reminded of Jesus' love for us and for the whole world. We are reminded that we are called into this fellowship to be bearers and witnesses of that love.

When we take communion, it is our opportunity to reflect on all we have seen and heard, and to process it so that we can understand how it fits in this great love story between humanity and God. Sharing this meal together is our opportunity to pause, and to make a connection to that moment when Jesus really did break the bread and pass it to those first witnesses of his ministry, and how we got here

today. When we take communion, we reflect on the awe and wonder at all that we have experienced and seen in this world, and then we are nourished so that we can be messengers to others and share that awe and wonder with them. Communion is food for the journey. It may not be on the side of the road or seem as impromptu as those first meals, but the symbolism is the same. Take the time to replenish your spirits and prepare yourselves as messengers to go out and tell the things you have seen—be bearers of the Good News, even in the midst of much but bad news happening around us.

Luke's six word faith statement for that story on the Emmaus Road is “You are witnesses of these things.” As modern day witnesses, I think our faith statement might be similar. “Witness, break bread, and spread love.”