

## TELLING THE WORLD WHAT WE'VE SEEN

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*Lead Minister*

**Text: Luke 24:36b–48**

Today is the third Sunday of Easter. The resounding joy of the hallelujahs of Easter Sunday is starting to fade, yet the imperative of resurrection faith inflects our worship and witness. So, the reminder I give you about our ongoing Easter journey is not a call to recreate the excitement of Easter Sunday. I invite us to embrace the newness of life and the divine commission by letting our encounter with the resurrected presence of love, light, and life inspire us to testify to what we've seen. I'm inviting us to accept Jesus' call to be witnesses as part of our practice of resurrection.

*[DeWayne read the scripture here and then led a prayer.]*

I grew up in a family that prayed often and regularly in the home. Whenever the Spirit prompted or the mood struck, my father would gather us for prayer, especially when family members visiting from far away were leaving to return home. I don't remember the substance of those prayers, but I do recall one phrase my father regularly said to close his prayers: "We'll tell the world what we've seen." Some of you with whom I've prayed may conceivably recall my using that exact phrase. Of course, much later in my life, I would understand what my father meant by that phrase. In declaring, "We'll tell the world what we've seen," the old preacher was committing to being a witness. He would tell whomever all about God's deeds and our experiences of God's presence. In our encounter with Jesus, the gracious manifestation of God's fulfillment of life, we behold good news, experience deliverance, or feel the life-giving presence of Jesus that we are excited to share with others. It is our covenant to be witnesses.

The evangelist of the Gospel of Luke foregrounds the connection between a divine encounter and the call to be witnesses to it. Luke narrates an appearance of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection that illustrates how their encounter with Jesus inspired and empowered them to be witnesses. In the verses before our scripture reading today, Cleopas and another disciple saw Jesus being revealed to them when they broke bread with someone they took to be a stranger, and they told the others what they had seen. And as they discussed it, Jesus stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." This is a confusing, confounding encounter. We see here the disciples' mixed feelings of joy and disbelief and their attempt to come to terms with Jesus as crucified and risen.

And I'm so glad that the Gospel writers don't romanticize these encounters. The disciples were terrified, alarmed, amazed, and skeptical. They are not sure what is happening or if it is Jesus they are seeing. They wrestle with doubt and fear, joy and disbelief, trying to make sense of this encounter. The theologian Fred Craddock rightly says, "The disciples thought they were encountering the dead, not the living." So, they've got some work to do to understand what they are experiencing, to understand the possibilities for life when death seems the only outcome. They grapple with the meaning of this experience, this encounter with a crucified Jesus. They strive to find their voices and the courage to share what they have witnessed. But I hope we understand that this encounter remains mysterious but real, inexplicable but meaningful.

Whatever is going on, they eventually come to know that they experienced the fullness of God in Jesus's presence. It is an embodied experience: Jesus acknowledges their fear and doubt and invites them to "touch me and see" who I am. He breaks bread with them, offering his presence in a meal that would become ritualized in all subsequent gatherings of the followers of Jesus. Jesus opens their minds to understand the scriptures, reminding them that God is fulfilling God's promise of life. He commissions them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all the nations. Jesus offers no appeal to believe nor a command to worship but a call to proclaim forgiveness and repentance, a call to witness. And this is a hopeful place to be, even though doubt and disbelief remain. Jesus is with them in their struggle, offering the gift of peace. Peace be with you. They wrestle with the fulfillment of scripture, and Jesus enlightens their minds to understand it. Ready for it or not, they are now witnesses.

I don't know how to explain the experience, but Luke's story is that the disciples encountered the crucified and risen Jesus, not a ghost or a spirit, not an idea or a dream, not a symbol or a doctrine. They were seeing God's fulfillment of God's promise of life in the resurrected body and person of Jesus. However, their encounter with Jesus is not an invitation to an explanation. No, it is an offer to testify. What did they see? What does it mean for their lives? This is the stuff of resurrection faith. We can't know precisely what happened in the room with Jesus, but we know that Jesus was present. And in the presence of love, light, and life, in the opening up of their minds to understand the law, the prophets, and the psalms, the disciples have a story to tell. They experienced forgiveness and repentance that transformed their lives and made them disciples. They have a testimony. They are witnesses commissioned to tell the world what they've seen.

It is not always easy to tell anybody what we've seen. Sometimes, in the mystery of faith, we don't know exactly what we've seen or how to think about a powerful experience. Sometimes, what we have witnessed may not be readily explainable, and some may not want to hear our testimony. Telling people what we've seen may be dramatically at odds with the conventional wisdom or the prevailing norms that make it too dangerous for us to testify. But we have a story to tell. We've encountered the eternal presence of love, light, and life. We are an Easter people who have seen life bursting forth all around us. We've known the life-giving newness that comes with forgiveness and repentance. And with our resurrection faith, we can tell the world what we've seen.

Perhaps that is why the church's witness has lost some of its power and appeal to the world. Could it be that the church has become less of a witness to love, light, and life than a proselytizer of doctrines and damnation? Could it be that the church has been proselytizing rather than testifying? What is the story of love, light, and life we want to share? Perhaps the church has said too little about forgiveness, dignity and compassion, caring and sharing, and the affirmation of humanity we've experienced as a beloved community. What if we stop explaining Jesus and start telling people our experience of the presence of Jesus? For many people, the church has not been a model for forgiveness and has too often demanded repentance without practicing it. Can we proclaim forgiveness and repentance to a world that has seen too little love, light, and life?

Like the psalmist, our hope lies in the presence of the risen One: "O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!" (Psalm 4:6). Our experience of Jesus is not going to look like what the Gospel of Luke described. Our encounter with the presence of the risen One will not look like what the disciples encountered. Whatever that encounter is like, fear, doubt, resistance, and apprehension will be constant companions in our practice of resurrection faith. And yet, Jesus still declares us to be witnesses. When we touch and see him in our context and social location, open our hearts, minds, and imaginations to the revelation God is determined to provide, we are ready for the practice of resurrection. We can tell the world what we've seen. We will be witnesses.

I haven't talked much about you going out and individually proclaiming what you've seen. The encounter with Jesus I'm referring to occurs within the context of our gathered community. Our witness is communal and community work. We all come together to receive Jesus' gift of peace. We all come together to search, read, and discern the scriptures, eagerly anticipating the Spirit's guiding presence to open our minds to understand what we've read, prayed, and experienced. We all come together as those who have experienced the transformative power of forgiveness and repentance and offer it to the world. We all come together as witnesses to the living presence of God in our midst, knowing that our very bodies and lives are the fulfillment of God's promise of life.

My father meant it when he said, "We'll tell the world what we have seen." And the church members of my youth were always willing to tell the world what they had seen. Every Sunday, we gathered for a worship service that included an extended time of testimony, and people offered personal accounts of their firsthand experience of the life-giving, life-affirming presence of love, light, and life. Their stories of forgiveness and repentance, healing and deliverance, unity and reconciliation, and joy and overcoming testified to God's fulfillment of the promise of life. We have stories like that at Plymouth that the world craves to hear. We have received Jesus' gift of peace, understanding of the scriptures, forgiveness and repentance, and the commission to be witnesses. Now tell the world what we've seen.