

Easter 3B 2018 Sermon

Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

A few years ago, Charles Hubbard of Austin, Texas, a Vietnam vet, received a letter from the Department of Veteran Affairs informing him that he was dead and that his family needed to return thousands of dollars in benefits. A victim of stolen identity, Hubbard found his checking account closed by the VA. After he made an extensive case for being alive, the VA informed him that it would take eight months for him to be officially brought back to life. That's when they would restore his pension benefits.¹

The resurrected Christ has his own problems convincing the disciples that he is alive and well, bodily present to them.¹ In *last* week's Gospel reading from *John*, Thomas needed physical proof that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead. In *this* week's Gospel reading from *Luke*, Jesus appears to his disciples and they think he's a ghost. He has to prove he's not by eating a piece of fish.

Why is it important that Jesus prove he is not a ghost? Well, first we must realize that, if Jesus **had** appeared as a ghost, this would not have been anything exceptional in the history of the Jewish people. King Saul, after all, had the witch of Endor conjure up the ghost of the dead prophet Samuel.² But more importantly, ghosts are tied to the past. One scholar notes, "Calling up the spirits of the dead represented an attempt to reinstate a past upon which God... had closed the door."³ John Shea puts it this way: "Ghosts are the disembodied presence of people who have died and are *still* considered **dead**."⁴ The resurrection of Jesus was not about reinstating the past, nor was Jesus dead. He was alive, and was bringing a *new* future, a new creation, a way of life different from that of the past: a life of sacrificial love, servanthood, and forgiveness, which is the very meaning of Easter!

It is also important that Jesus prove he is not a ghost because the *bodily* resurrection of Christ calls for his followers (then *and* now) to embody his presence in our **own** bodies, in our **own** world. In the last words of today's passage, the penultimate words of Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things."

You and I are witnesses to the new life of the risen Christ. And what does that mean? It means that we embody the spirit, love, character, and teachings of Jesus. To become *witnesses* means that, in the words of C. S. Lewis, we become "little Christs" in this world.⁵

My friends, you and I, by virtue of our baptism, **are** witnesses to Christ, consciously or unconsciously. Our words and actions toward those we meet in our daily lives speak volumes about what we truly believe and value. We Christians at times are *positive* witnesses to Christ, and at times (unfortunately) are *negative* witnesses. "I like your Christ," Mahatma Gandhi reportedly said; "I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."⁶ German theologian Karl Rahner stated: "The number one cause of atheism is Christians. Those who proclaim God with their mouths and deny Him with their lifestyles is what an unbelieving world finds simply unbelievable."⁷ Anglican author Evelyn Underhill stated that receiving Holy Communion each week must impact how we live our lives, or Holy Communion is empty. "As Christ gives Himself to feed us," she wrote, "so we have to **incarnate** something of His all-loving, all-sacrificing soul. If we do not, then we have not *really* received Him."⁸ *Believing* the Gospel and "*behaving*" the Gospel must go hand-in-hand, if we are to be *positive* witnesses to Christ, rather than negative witnesses.

In our baptismal vows, which we all reaffirm in our Eucharist at least four times a year, we promise to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ."⁹ Word *and* example. "Faith without works is dead," wrote St. James in his letter. (*James 2:26*) And St. Francis instructed his followers, "Preach the Gospel always; when necessary, use words."¹⁰

My friends, you and I **are** witnesses to the risen Christ! The only question is whether our lives are positive or negative witnesses to our world.

One of the problems we have, I think, is that we can all-too-easily get confused about our role in life's courtroom drama. We forget that we are to be *witnesses* to Christ's self-giving love in our *own* lives, and not prosecutors or judges of *other* peoples' lives. Jesus said, "Do not judge,"¹¹ yet, if you are at all like me, that is precisely what we tend to do: we play the role of prosecutor or judge, **rather** than the role Jesus *tells* us to play – being a **witness** to his self-sacrificing life and love. The author Madeleine L'Engle, whose book *A Wrinkle in Time* is now a recently-released movie, wrote, "We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how *wrong* **they** are and how *right* **we** are, but by

showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.”¹² *That’s* being a faithful witness to the risen Christ in our world.

Another problem we sometimes have in being genuine witnesses to the risen Christ is that living a life in Christ can put us at odds with our culture – and *that* can make us **very** uncomfortable, to say the least, since we breathe the very air of our culture. Jesus’ life so challenged the religious and socio-political culture of *his* day that it got him crucified. When we Christians today, for instance, take in refugees fleeing from the horrors of war or gangs or famine, we can encounter resistance from our culture. After all, taking in refugees involves some risks and costs time and money, and we would rather *not* take those risks or pay that price if we don’t have to. And we *don’t* have to – **unless** we want to be witnesses to the risen Christ. When the homeless person we have befriended behaves poorly, our human tendency is to write them off, even though **Jesus** *never* wrote off tax collectors, adulterers, and others whom his culture rejected. People who behave poorly are an offense to our sense of rightness, propriety, and righteousness; and again, we’d rather not deal with them if we don’t have to. And we *don’t* have to – unless we want to be witnesses to the risen Christ. Opening our homes and churches and neighborhoods to strangers leaves us vulnerable to possible harm (harm to our buildings and possessions as well as to our persons – and believe me, *I know*), and we’d rather not incur that risk. We judge the potential **downside** *for us* as outweighing the potential **upside** for the other person, and we do so almost every time. At least I do. Insurance companies thrive when their clients (us) minimize risks, providing another incentive to **not** take the risk of being a witness to Christ’s radical, sacrificial love.

But the earliest Christians took such risks. Witnessing to Christ in the first two hundred years of Christianity meant that Christians often lost their lives – often enough that the Greek **word** for “witnessing” – *martyreo* – took on the meaning of “**dying** for one’s faith,” being a martyr, a witness. Our culture is willing to send our young men and women into war, risking their lives, and we spend millions of dollars doing so. Yet we are reluctant to spend millions of dollars to **save** the lives of refugees fleeing war. I read this past week that so far this year, our nation has taken in a total of 11 refugees fleeing the horrible war in Syria.¹³ And this despite the fact that we *know* the kinds of atrocities being perpetrated on the Syrian people – like the use of chemical weapons; and despite the fact that Defense Secretary General James Mattis says, “I’ve never seen refugees as traumatized as those coming out of Syria.”¹⁴

Let’s be honest, my friends: being positive witnesses to Christ in our world is *not* easy! Jesus himself said so. “If any want to become my followers,” he said, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” (*Luke 9:23-24*)

To be a witness to the risen Christ is to give our whole lives as evidence. Priest and author Henri Nouwen suggests that at the end of each day we ask ourselves these questions: “Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone’s face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love?” “These are the real questions,” Fr. Nouwen writes. “I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits, here in this world and the life to come.”¹⁵

It wasn’t easy for Charles Hubbard to prove to the VA that he was alive. It wasn’t easy for the risen Christ to prove to his disciples that he was alive. And it isn’t easy for you and me to prove that Christ is alive today. Yet we are faithful witnesses to the fact that “Christ is risen indeed” “when we live in a way that defies any explanation *other* than the presence of the risen Christ within us. Look, touch, see, believe! It isn’t a ghost. It’s the living God”¹⁶ living in you and me.

AMEN

¹ Peter W. Marty, “Our risen savior has taste buds and a digestive tract,” *The Christian Century*, March 28, 2018 issue

² see 1 Samuel 28:3–19; for other references to ghosts, see Isaiah 8:19; 19:3; 29:4)

³ Nolland, J. (1998). [Luke 18:35–24:53](#) (Vol. 35C, p. 1213). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

⁴ John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 118

⁵ “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. If we do, we shall then be sharing a life which was begotten, not made, which always existed and always will exist. Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. We shall love the Father as He does and the Holy Ghost will arise in us. He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has — by what I call ‘good infection.’ Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.” — C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

⁶ This widely-quoted saying of Gandhi cannot be verified, but may trace back to a 1926 review [*The Atlanta Constitution*, 7 February 1926, p. F14] by the Reverend W.P. King of E. Stanley Jones’s *The Christ of the Indian Road* (published in 1925 by The Abington Press, New York City) <http://message.snopes.com/showthread.php?t=61900>

⁷ <https://www.pinterest.dk/pin/196680708704444323/>

⁸ Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), *The Light of Christ* [1944]

⁹ *Book of Common Prayer* p. 305

¹⁰ While this widely-quoted saying of St. Francis cannot be found in his (few) writings, Franciscan priest (and Francis scholar) Richard Rohr nonetheless uses the quote, saying that it definitely reflects Francis’ spirituality. <https://cac.org/rule-of-the-gospel-2017-06-06/>

¹¹ Matthew 7:1; Luke 6:37

¹² L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (1980)

¹³ Deborah Amos, “The U.S. Has Accepted Only 11 Syrian Refugees This Year,” NPR, April 12, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/04/12/602022877/the-u-s-has-welcomed-only-11-syrian-refugees-this-year>

¹⁴ <https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/susan-jones/mattis-syria-some-things-are-simply-inexcusable-contrary-impulses>

¹⁵ <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/216240>

¹⁶ Kristen Barger Grant, "Fresh evidence (Luke 24:36b-48)," The Christian Century, April 19, 2003, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2003-04/fresh-evidence>