

**“Can I Give a Witness?”**  
**Luke 24:44-53**  
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Some years ago it was said of a colleague in our part of North Carolina Baptist life that no matter what Gospel the lectionary was following in a given year, he always preached out of Luke. He may have read from any of the four canonical Gospels, but his message would be shaped by the Lukan perspective on the Jesus story wherein Jesus has a particular concern for the poor and outcast.

This is not the worst thing someone could say about a preacher. We all have our biases and Luke’s emphasis on Jesus’ concern for the poor is noble and as valid as any other emphasis. As you might have observed by now, I am heavily influence by Luke as well. The interesting thing is not all Luke fans spend much time on Luke’s ending.

Baptists tend to focus on Matthew’s ending, the so-called Great Commission where Jesus sends his followers out to make disciples of all nations. In John’s ending Peter is told to feed Jesus’ sheep and we are led to believe that this calling applies to all of us. In the original ending of Mark, the disciples discover an empty tomb and go away amazed as the reader is left to finish the story for him/herself. But in Luke, as in its sequel, the book of Acts, the disciples are called to be witnesses.

There are other challenging details in this ending. Luke the physician says that Jesus has to open the disciples’ minds, almost surgically, to get to them to understand what God has done through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Even after all this time, even after his resurrection, they still don’t get it. Then, Jesus, is taken up into the heavens right before their eyes, as if the Starship Enterprise beams him up. This is what Ascension Day is all about. But the most troubling detail in this story is the calling to be witnesses.

We have many negative associations with the terms “witnessing” and “evangelism.” We think of screaming preachers on the street corner. We think of hateful signs on vehicles. We think of angry people

talking about the love of God in a way that makes us want to run for cover. In her book *Out of the Saltshaker* Rebecca Manley Pippert says this, “There was a part of me that secretly felt evangelism was something you shouldn’t do to your dog, let alone your friend.” Many of us feel like this and our dogs may be closer to God anyway.

The trouble is witnessing is a core part of our calling as followers of Jesus and in this time of so much abrasive witness, the need for a different kind of witness – a loving and inviting witness - is that much greater. The question is – how do we reclaim the place of faithful witnessing? How do we get past the negative associations? In African-American church tradition there is a phrase – can I get a witness? It is a call for someone else to have a story like mine, to offer a good word about God. Our challenge is slightly different – can I give a witness?

If we are ever to reclaim this calling, we need to be clear about what witnessing is and what it is not. It is not a high-pressure endeavor designed to manipulate or frighten people into signing on to a set of theological propositions. It is simply telling other people what we have experienced with the God who was in Christ. It is not a recitation of a packaged plan but our personal story, nothing more and nothing less.

This is how witnessing is done in the Christian Testament. No one feels a burden to convert the other. Witness is given and the results are left to that person and to God. Furthermore, even when people seem to respond to a hard-sell approach, wounds are often inflicted.

In the book *Same Kind of Different as Me*, one of the co-authors, Ron Hall, describes his conversion experience. He says that he and his new wife were basic Sunday-go-to-meeting Methodists until they were invited to attend a six-week group study at a zealous Bible church. They later discovered that they had been labelled “lost,” “nonbelieving,” and “unsaved,” possibly because they had no fish stickers on their cars. So, they were pummeled with questions about whether they were saved, and though the process seemed abrasive and the view of Christian faith seemed limited – it was only about correct belief – Ron had not made a profession of faith before and so he did. His wife felt no need to do so, but it was clear that the group looked upon her with judgment.

Reflecting on that experience, Hall says this (p. 61).

Looking back now, I mourn the mutual wounds inflicted in verbal battles with the ‘unsaved.’ In fact, I have chosen to delete that particular term from my vocabulary as I have learned that even with my \$500 European-designer bifocals (the book was published in 2006), I cannot see into a person’s heart to know his spiritual condition. All I can do is tell the jagged tale of my own spiritual journey and declare that my life has been the better for having followed Christ.

That is what Christian witness is, what Jesus calls us to do – simply tell the jagged tale of our spiritual journey and declare that our lives have been the better for having followed Christ.

But we not only need to be clear about what witnessing is and what it is not; we need to be clear about what we are up against in the culture around us, the general assumptions many have about who Christians are and what we believe. What do most people think of when they hear the word “Christian,” especially younger people who have left the church or never been part of it?

They think of judgmental people who spend a lot of time talking about who is in and who is out in eternity; not people who spend their lives feeding the hungry, clothing the needy, housing the homeless. They think of negative people who are anti-fun, anti-gay, anti-diversity; not people who celebrate life, include others and welcome the stranger. They think of angry people who close their minds to anything new like the theory of evolution, genetic research, new ways to view people of other faiths. And if this is who Christians are, imagine who Christian ministers might be. There is no quicker way to empty a room than to tell everyone you are a minister, especially a Baptist one!

Why do people think this is who Christians are? Because so many prominent voices in our culture, particularly those who receive media attention, fit this image. So, any time we identify ourselves as Christian and begin to speak a word about our experience, this is what people have

in mind. Needless to say, we have a great deal to overcome with our words and manner of life, but the fact that we do provides motivation to be about the work. We may wonder what one person or even one church can do to overcome these limited and negative images that are so prevalent, but we have to start somewhere and this is how change happens – one person at a time, one church at a time.

But if we are to reclaim our capacity to give a witness, we not only need to understand what witnessing is and what we are up against; we benefit from something happening in between our experience with Christ and our witness, something like what happens in today's reading from Luke. As we join the story, Luke says Jesus continues to teach them after his resurrection and he "opens their minds" to understand the scriptures. Apparently they have more to learn about who Jesus is and what God accomplishes through his life, death and resurrection. And they learn this before they go out witnessing.

We too benefit from further learning, from further reflection, before we go out to fulfill our calling to give witness. Cognitive reflection is not a substitute for personal experience. And we will never fully understand our encounters with the Holy. So, we need to leave room for mystery and wonder as we approach scripture and faith. For example, in today's story, we need to resist the modern tendency to dismiss the very idea of Jesus' ascending to be with God. Who are we to rule out what God can do? But all of this having been said, reflection is still a good thing, learning is a good thing.

I have shared with some of you before a story about a conflict John Wesley had with a man who had no use for book learning. The man wrote Wesley a letter saying, "The Lord has directed me to write to you that, while you know Greek and Hebrew, he can do without your book learning." Wesley replied, "Your letter received. I wish to say that while the Lord does not direct me to tell you, yet I wish to say to you on my own responsibility that the Lord does not need your ignorance either." (*The Ministers Manual*, 1982, p. 244 from Charles E. Ferrell).

Book learning may not be a substitute for personal experience but nor is ignorance a spiritual gift. Jesus opens the minds of his disciples

before he calls them to give witness. Writing to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul prays for a spirit of wisdom so that the eyes of the people's hearts are enlightened. Reflection is a good thing, learning is a good thing. Giving witness to our experience with Jesus is a part our calling, but how we give witness matters immensely, whom we say Jesus is matters, as does how we live. Reflection can help focus our witness.

One of the simplest ways we give witness is through baptism as Jesse Vogel has demonstrated today. In the early church, new believers gave their verbal testimony in the water and were expected to go into some detail. We might have some long services today if we did that and discourage a number of shy people from professing their faith.

But the truth is: baptism itself is a form of testimony. We not only confess Christ as Savior and Lord through this experience, embrace God's love and make our commitment to follow Jesus, but the way we are baptized expresses our faith. We are buried with Christ in baptism... and raised to walk in newness of life.

It is an act of humility, not arrogance. It is more about what God does for us than anything we do. And it is not just about what we believe, but how we live. The more witness we have like that, the more faithful we will be to our calling and the more people will become followers of Jesus.