

“Work To Do”
Luke 24:44–53
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I remember quite well a conversation I had with the daughter and son-in-law of church members in another setting. I had just finished my doctoral work—five years of study and writing, while pastoring a church with a thousand members, and trying to be a decent father to a three-year-old, though not doing a great job. The couple was visiting from far away where they were both university professors. When they asked about my academic work, I told them I was relieved to be done, to which they replied, “Well, now is the time when you have to make good on all the promises of what you would do when you finished that work.”

I confess that my first thought, which I did not verbalize, was not very gracious. I was exhausted and I was looking forward to a moment of celebration and rest while these folks were telling me I had work to do. I wanted to blow raspberries their way... but it would not have been very ministerial, especially in the sanctuary, where we were talking. So, I nodded my head disingenuously and asked how they were doing.

I recall this conversation today because I wonder if this isn't how the disciples feel when Jesus appears to them one last time in the reading from Luke. They follow him until he dies on a cross. They go through the trauma of grief and the desperate fear of wondering if they might be next. Then, before they have time to make sense of their loss, they discover that he has been raised and experience emotional whiplash! They are thrilled that he is alive, but they need a moment to take it all in, to bask in the glow of the resurrection. Jesus has other ideas. He says, “There is work to do; be my witnesses.” They don't blow raspberries at him, but they must sigh. Yet this is their calling, and ours as well.

The disciples are called to be witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection, to the gift of forgiveness, to all he has accomplished. And they are to share this message with all nations, that is, the whole world,

beginning with Jerusalem. They are not to spend their looking up into the heavens, wondering when Jesus will return, even if they are weary, according to Acts. They are to put their shoulders to the plow, be about his work, continue his ministry, be his witnesses. So are we.

The trouble is “witnessing” has become a dirty word. In her book *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life* Rebecca Manley Pippert says, “There was a part of me that secretly felt evangelism was something you shouldn’t do to your dog, let alone your friend (p. 16).” Many of us have felt this way because our images of witnessing and evangelism are all so negative.

We think of people verbally assaulting complete strangers with threats of hell, offering a formula for escape—simply signing on the dotted line to certain beliefs—and pressing for a decision like some used car salesman. If this is what witnessing is, we shouldn’t do it to our dog, whose eternal condition may be better than ours anyway.

Some people embrace this approach. I interviewed a fundamentalist pastor for an evangelism class in seminary who said his dysfunctional family of origin was transformed by complete strangers who came to their house witnessing in this way. And thus, he thought this was the only way to share Christian faith. But more people are turned off by it, and it is not the dominant form of witness in scripture.

What happens there is that people tell others what they have experienced with Jesus. The woman at the well, the man born blind, even the disciples in Acts who heed Jesus’ command to tell others about his life and ministry, death, and resurrection, only tell others what they have seen and heard with their own eyes and ears. There is no formula. They do not reduce the Gospel to a small number of spiritual laws.

Furthermore, they talk to people they know, and their focus is on healing and hope, not judgment, the meaning and purpose they have found because of Jesus. And there is no pressure involved, no closing of a sale as if human beings are a commodity to be traded, or the Good News is so mediocre it has to be forced on people. People are left free to make their own decisions and God is trusted with the outcome.

In his book *Evangelism for Normal People* John Bowen recommends this approach even in interfaith relationships.

I do hope for my Muslim friends to become followers of Jesus. I would not be faithful to Jesus if I didn't. I know some of them hope for me to become a Muslim. All the same, we enjoy one another's friendship. We enjoy listening to one another and trying to understand one another's faith. We laugh together, tease one another, share pain together. There are issues where we find ourselves closer to one another than to our secular friends. And we have no choice but to leave the outcome of our theological discussions to God. (p. 175)

That is an approach to witnessing that many of us can embrace.

But it is important to note that this calling to be about the work of giving witness to Jesus is intended for the whole world, for all nations, Jesus says. In a time of nationalistic thinking and isolationism, not only in this country but around the world, it is critical that we not lose the universal trajectory of Christian faith. Jesus calls us to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to *all nations*, to make disciples of *all nations*, to share God's love with *all nations*. Isolationism and hostility toward the other have no place in Christian faith, though we must acknowledge that the church has struggled to embrace this truth.

Some years ago, Dr. Harshaw and I were teaching an ENCORE class on the history of racial division in the church when a participant in the class asked why Muslims have been able to experience a sense of unity across all distinctions, especially during the Hajj, while Christians, who have a calling to embrace all people and nations, are so divided. We didn't have a good answer. It is a word of challenge for us to embrace our calling to echo God's universal concern for all. Islam has this concern, as does Judaism.

We think of Judaism as being isolationist. There is one Chosen People. But the prophet Isaiah says they are chosen to be a light for the nations, echoing the call to Abram. And in a fascinating article included in this month's issue of *The Christian Century* Austin Reid Albanese documents the many ways in which Jewish people have pursued this universalist vision over the centuries, even in the Roman Empire (pp. 56-60). There is evidence of this in the New Testament, Jesus' words

about the Pharisees crossing land and sea to make converts in Matthew 23:15. We're not talking about universalism as in the idea that everyone will be saved, but rather God's universal concern for all that God's people are called to embrace in all three Abrahamic traditions.

We can only speak with the voice of our faith which is linked to Jesus. We can only give witness to what we have experienced with the Spirit of the Risen Christ. But our calling is to share it with all people, all nations, all races and ethnicities, because God's love is for *all*.

The question is—how do we do this? I don't mean—with words or deeds, in person or in print, etc.—though these are important considerations for another day. Rather I mean—what enables us to accomplish this enormous task? One thing Jesus does before he says the disciples are witnesses to his work is open their minds to understand the scriptures so they can see how his ministry is a fulfillment of ancient promises. He opens their minds... to understand the scriptures... We too need open minds and understanding, especially in this time.

There have always been debates about various approaches to education. Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind* which came out in 1987, offered a critique of many aspects of liberal education at that time, some of which I agree with, but what would the author think of our time—a time when science is questioned, experts are replaced with ideologues, people don't listen to other views, attention spans are shrinking, research is being defunded, truth can be alternative, and education is viewed as evil? What do we think about all of this in a church that has valued education through the centuries, being connected to the beginnings of Meredith College and Wake Forest University?

It's not a matter of liberal versus conservative but of minds closing. Luke the physician says Jesus opens his disciples' minds, almost like a surgical process, because doing so is critical to understanding who he is, and that understanding is essential for faithful witness.

For we can quote scripture and not have a clue what it means. It's the good reason church leaders for centuries kept the Bible out of the language of the people. The bad reason was that they wanted control. But the concern was not unfounded, and not only do we need to read

scripture with an openness to learn; we need to leave room for Jesus to be more than we think so that we can grow in our understanding of him.

In *Prince Caspian*, one of C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan, a Christ figure, has an enlightening conversation with Lucy. "Aslan," says Lucy, "you're bigger." "That is because you are older, little one," he replies. "Not because you are?" she asks, to which he says, "I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger." As will we because there is always more to God and Christ than we know.

So, Jesus opens his disciples' minds to understand the scriptures and learn about who he is. He also tells them to stay in Jerusalem until they have been clothed with power from on high, that is, until they have received the Spirit on Pentecost. The disciples need not only open minds and greater understanding to accomplish their task; they need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. So do we. Whether we seek to give witness to our experience with Christ through words or music or art or with acts of compassion or any other way, we need the Spirit's help.

While writing about Isaiah 40's claim that those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, Old Testament scholar Page Kelley told a story about a Native American living near Juneau, Alaska before the widespread use of electricity (*Interpreting Isaiah*, pp. 49-50). He went into the city one day and was astonished when a man in a store pulled a cord and the room was filled with light. Not knowing where the man lived, the merchant measured off three feet of cord, attached a socket and switch, screwed in a bulb, and handed it to him. He returned home, suspended the light from the ceiling, gathered his family, and pulled the cord. Nothing happened because he had no electricity.

We are like that, Dr. Kelley said, we have to be connected to our source of power to shine brightly. Indeed, we do. This applies to every aspect of life but especially to our witness and ministry. So, we seek the Spirit's empowerment before we speak or act.

The story ends with Jesus blessing his disciples, even as he is carried up into heaven. And thus, Christ is always blessing us. The work we have to do is not drudgery but rather joy and privilege. So, raspberries are not needed, only gratitude and a willing spirit.