

YOU ARE WITNESSES

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, April 19, 2015

Third Sunday of Easter – 10:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Text: Luke 24:13-49 (NRSV, lightly adapted)

Now on that same day two of Jesus' companions were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them 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. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”



http://www.oceansbridge.com/paintings/museums/new-hermitage/Roghman_Roelant_%28Roulant%29-ZZZ-Landscape_%28Christ_on_the_Road_to_Emmaus%29.jpg

As I said at the beginning of last week's sermon, no one actually saw or witnessed Jesus' resurrection. No one actually saw or witnessed what happened to Jesus' lifeless body between sundown on Good Friday and sunrise on Easter Sunday. No one witnessed the stone being rolled back or the once-dead Jesus walking out of the tomb.

The things that Mary Magdalene and the other women *did* see and witness, however—the empty tomb and a vision of angels—led them to believe that God had raised Jesus from death, that God had breathed into the Crucified One the breath of resurrection life. When they told this to the men who were hiding behind locked doors, the men did not believe them (Luke 24:8-11).

It was not until the risen Christ actually appeared to the disciples—men and women alike—that these many companions of Jesus came to believe in the resurrection. Today's reading from the gospel according to Luke narrates two of those appearances: to two of Jesus' followers on the Emmaus road; and to the “eleven and their companions” in Jerusalem.

In the first resurrection appearance in Luke's gospel, the travelers on the Emmaus road don't at first recognize this “stranger” as the risen Christ walking and talking with them—much as Mary Magdalene in John's gospel first thought that the person in the garden who spoke to her was the gardener

In the second resurrection appearance in Luke's gospel, the first thing Jesus says to his followers is “Peace be with you”—which is exactly how the Risen One greets his followers in his two appearances to them in John's gospel. In both Luke and John, Jesus shows the marks of the nails in his hands and feet to the disciples, so they will know that they are not seeing a ghost.

Belief in the resurrection was neither instantaneous nor perfect nor completely reassuring, even for those who were the original witnesses to the Risen One. Luke's narrative tells us that Jesus' followers were at first “startled and terrified” when Jesus appeared to them. In last week's reading, Thomas was clear that he wouldn't believe until he saw Jesus for himself. Recall that Jesus said to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

One of my favorite spiritual writers, Nora Gallagher, is, like all of us, a person who has not seen and yet has come to believe. Like all of us, her believing has its moments of doubt. She confesses that “belief and disbelief in the resurrection trade places in my heart like ‘watchmen taking shifts’....I've known for years that even those words—‘belief’ and ‘disbelief’—don't really describe what I think when I think about the resurrection. Something happened to [Jesus], is the way I put it to myself. Something happens to me.”¹

As she struggles to find “coherence [and] possibility” in the Easter message, Nora Gallagher concludes: “Whether or not I believe in the

¹ Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen – A Year Lived in Faith*, 137.

resurrection makes no difference if I don't make a different life. We are the ongoing story.”²

What does it mean for us in our time to “make a different life,” to be the “ongoing story”? To put it another way, what does it mean for us in our time to be “witnesses” to the originating story of our faith, to the story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection? Unlike those first witnesses, we don't have to hide behind closed doors for fear of the authorities. We do, however, have to give our testimony to the truth and beauty and goodness of the story of Jesus in the context of many strident voices offering competing narratives.

One of those strident voices comes from an extended family that goes by the name of the Westboro Baptist Church. This family is famous for picketing the funerals of American military personnel with strident placards proclaiming that “God hates fags.” If this family had a clue about who Jesus was and what he taught and embodied, they would hate themselves for trying to represent him in this way.

At the very other end of the spectrum, another strident voice is that of TV personality Bill Maher, who sells his own brand of what online journalist Mary Elizabeth Williams has called “aggressive atheism.” She writes: “Maher has famously said, 'Religion is dangerous because it allows human beings who don't have all the answers to think that they do'—which is pretty funny, given the know-it-all arrogance of the anti-religion big leaguers like Maher himself.”

I want to offer this morning an alternative to these strident voices. I share this testimony with you at some length because it resonates so beautifully with my own experience, and I think it will resonate with you as well. This testimony is by a blogger named Micha Boyett, who says of herself:

“I am a wife and a stay at home mom who left full time youth ministry, moved thousands of miles away, and began my thirties in sudden succession. And since that rapid life shift, I've been in a constant longing to find God in the simplicity and ordinariness of my life with a 4-year-old and a toddler. In the past two years we have moved from San Francisco to Austin and then back to San Francisco again. And, somehow in that instability, I am learning what stability might actually be.”

A few years ago, Micha Boyett—“Mama Monk”—posted on her blog a brief essay, “Why I Call Myself a Christian.” She wrote:

“How many times have I cringed inside when conversations with new people in my life turn spiritual and I have to define myself through my beliefs? I'm not ashamed to confess my belief in Jesus Christ. But I am often ashamed to use the word: “Christian.” What baggage does it carry in the minds of my nonbelieving friends? I assume (or fear?) that their first thought is of anti-abortion demonstrators shouting “Murderers!” outside Planned Parenthood buildings, or homophobic slurs spouted from the pulpit, or Catholic priests

² Ibid., 138.

abusing children then covering their tracks.... And the truth is, [these are real examples] of what [some] Christians are a lot of the time.

“But that’s not what Christians are all of time. Last Thursday night, I sat in room with some of the saints of San Francisco who work for a ministry called [City Team](#). They serve the most broken of the poor on the streets of San Francisco, providing them with food, clothes and opportunities for new lives. They bring drug addicts through an entire year of rehab, offering them purpose and hope and fulfillment outside of the lives they’ve known before. Then, graduates of the program are partnered with professionals who mentor them and walk with them through the process of the job search.

“I listened to a young man my age share his heartbreaking childhood of abuse and neglect, his spiral into heroin, his time in prison, and his discovery of both Christ and insects. (Yes, I said insects.) It turns out he’s a genius whose passion for insects has carried him out of his former life and into college and graduate work and now into an incredible opportunity to study with entomologists in Madagascar.

“Just as I encountered the Christians who have given their lives to healing to the broken of San Francisco, my dear friends in [Young Life](#) outside Philadelphia were on their way home from a week at camp. Yesterday, I talked on the phone with my friend Cat, who walked me through the stories of all twenty-two kids who went on the trip with Radnor High School. No, their stories are not as dramatic as those of rescued lives off the street, but they are just as powerful.

“I know the 'Every-girl' in a suburban high school girl who believes her only value is in her own success (whether it’s in the classroom, in athletics, in the eyes of her demanding parents, or in the label she’s given by the boys she longs to impress). I also know the beauty of the moment when that girl recognizes that she is loved unconditionally by a God who knows her deepest longings. The aching heavy weight on her back falls to the ground and she actually believes she is valuable simply because her Creator knows her and chooses her.

“Who told her that such a love exists? Christians did.

“That’s why I refuse to remove that name [of Christian] from my [name]. As much as there is judgment and hatred and false pretensions in the Church, it doesn’t change the fact that when I was thirteen and our dishwasher broke in the midst of a particularly difficult financial season for my parents, an anonymous member of our church had a dishwasher delivered to our house.

“Community is beautiful and it is broken. And the [community of faith] was Jesus’ idea, in spite of what he must have known of its failures. Am I proud of the Inquisition, the mistreatment of women, the present day hatred of homosexuals? No, I’m ashamed....Still, I am a Christian. See me and make every assumption you want to make. Because the truth is, I’m just as screwed up as the rest of my

clan who call themselves by the name. But, understand this: there is beauty in the Church and that beauty is what I cannot resist.”³

To this testimony, this witness, of Micah Boyett I would simply add:

At the heart of the story of Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—there is truth and beauty, goodness and mercy, love and mystery.

At the heart of the community of faith that hungers and thirsts to follow in the way of Jesus, there is truth and beauty, goodness and mercy, love and mystery.

Yes, we are the ongoing story. However flawed and imperfect **our** story may be, however partial and limited our faith may be, we are witnesses.

We are witnesses to truth and beauty.

We are witnesses to goodness and mercy.

We are witnesses to love and mystery.

We are witnesses to one of the greatest stories ever told.

Thanks and praise be to God! Amen.

³ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/michaboyett/2010/08/why-i-call-myself-a-christian/>.