

“You Are Witnesses”

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New Member Welcome and Communion

June 2, 2019

First Congregational Church of Haddam

Higganum Congregational Church

Luke 24:44-53

44Then 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.”

45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49And 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.”

50Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Get Ready. Get Set. Go! But not quite yet. That’s how I think of Ascension Sunday.

The faded lilies all have been planted outside, and the Risen Lord of Easter has been appearing among the disciples for almost fifty days. He has not healed anyone, as was so often Jesus’ custom in ministry, but instead has shared meals with his disciples, breaking bread in Emmaus and on the lakeshore. Now, Luke records in Verse 45, he at last opens their minds to understand the Scriptures- that’s been a long time coming!- and pronounces them Witnesses.

In the black church, there’s a custom of pausing in a sermon to ask the assembled saints, “Can I get a witness?” Originally, it’s my understanding it was a genuine invitation to someone present to come forward and proclaim their testimony about the point at hand. “God is faithful! Can I get a witness?” And Mrs. Jones goes up to say how her long-standing prayer has been answered for her grandson to graduate college or the doctors to figure out the right combination treatment to stabilize her daughter’s asthma. “Jesus’ name is powerful. Can I get a witness?” And Mr. Washington stands to affirm that with Jesus’ help he is celebrating his 10th anniversary of sobriety or that last week’s protest march has swayed the City Council to do the right thing.

Today, “Can I get a witness?” may more be a call intended to elicit a general congregational response, an “Amen” or “Yes.” “God is good all the time. Can I get a witness?” “All the time, God is good.” “People still need the good Good News, can I get a witness?” “Yes, alright.” “Amen!” “You preach it!”

Like many traditional expressions, “Can I get a witness?” even is used ironically now, said wryly after something self-evident to those present. In a New England Dunkin Donuts in Spring:

“These potholes are a menace, can I get a witness?” Or in the teacher’s lounge the Monday after Prom: “The seniors already have checked out, can I get a witness?”

Friends, today we members of Christ’s church, you members of First Congregational Church of Haddam and Higganum Congregational Church, have to take seriously our commission as Witnesses. It’s not a joking or ironic situation. We probably cannot get by with just cheerleading others, tossing in an “Amen” now and then, and saying “You preach it.” Jesus is the one opening our minds to understand and speaking to us, to our hearts, saying “You are witnesses.”

Together as Christ’s body, we bear witness to what we know, what we have seen:

- That God is faithful. That God is still there when we wander off and take our time about coming back. That God has sustained the church, these churches, generation to generation.
- That God is good. That God’s blessing is on us in our fellowship, in our service, in our worship, in our orientation toward wholeness.
- And that the name of Jesus does have power. That we have prayed for strength or wisdom or peace and received as much as we could receive. That barriers have been broken down within us and in the world in his liberating name. That though sometimes we don’t hear a “yes” to our requests, we always hear a “yes” to *ourselves* from Jesus.

Today four new members have signed on to be part of our team of Witnesses. Today we all will be fed at Christ’s Table. And today when we go out from the service into service, each of us has the same instruction: get ready, get suited up!

For though Jesus did leave, he did not leave the disciples then, nor does he leave us now, alone or ill-equipped. The “not quite yet” in our Ascension story is his instruction to wait for the Holy Spirit.

Now, each year we who follow the liturgical calendar, the church year, play a funny game. We’ve learned over the centuries that without a bit of guidance there can be a tendency for churches and particularly I’d guess Preachers to favor some aspects of the story over others, and to leave parts out. One congregation might want to dwell in the Christmas season, when Jesus is cute, and avoid picturing the disrupter who overturned Temple tables. Another pastor might love to talk about the need for forgiveness and about sin, and skip the scandalous stories of grace Jesus told or how he treated actual sinners.

And so when we agree to go by the calendar we agree to encounter all of it that will fit in the calendar: Jesus the baby and the refugee and the criminal, Jesus the healer and the fire-and-brimstone preacher, the Holy Spirit as a dove and a still small voice, and a noisy wind and tongues of flame.

The game we play is to pretend we are discovering these things for the first time, even as we live our faith lives knowing them already true in our own moment. In Advent we anticipate the birth of Jesus, but we also pray for the return of Christ on behalf of the world we see on the news. At Christmas we remember the No Vacancy inn at Bethlehem, as we try to offer Christ room in our

own hearts. We weep on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and act and even feel delighted and surprised a few days later when we shout “Alleluia, Christ is risen!”

So here, on Ascension Sunday, a week before we observe the festival of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out, we hear Jesus say “Wait”, but we already have available to us the equipping Holy Spirit. We already can “Go” in strength to proclaim “*repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations, beginning from*” right here.

The question is, will we? Will we be Witnesses? Or rather, how will we? What will our witness be? Because our lives lived under the name “Christian” do proclaim what being one of Jesus’ followers means to those who observe us. How we speak and treat others: that is our witness.

During the Easter season, you may have noticed I have left out the prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon in our worship liturgy, or rather I let the brief confession of sin that is part of the Lord’s Prayer each week carry all the weight during this Easter season of abundant grace. And though I’d say every season is one of abundant grace, as we come into the season after Pentecost, into what the liturgical calendar adorably and accurately calls “Ordinary Time,” those prayers of confession will be back.

Not because we’re any worse than before, but because I want there to be a place in our worship for us to mark our ups and our downs, to be serious about making spiritual progress and effort.

We are about to be, already are, invited to let the Spirit move us and change us. Without meaning to, we will resist that invitation because it means change. And so we will need, again and again, to confess that we have fallen short, and start over. That, not perfection, is the spiritual life. It’s why proclaiming “*repentance and forgiveness of sins*” is the good Good news.

Some people don’t join the church because they can’t believe in the assortment of testimonies those first disciples made, to having seen miracles like Jesus disappearing into the clouds. But more don’t join because they don’t want to be counted among hypocrites, because we have feared or failed to convey that the church is a community comprised entirely of imperfect Witnesses.

The church, as Martin Luther is said to have said, and as you’ll hear me say again if you haven’t heard me say already, is a bunch of “beggars showing other beggars where to find bread.”

It is exciting to have new members, new friends to share in this blessed journey, isn’t it? During the upcoming Ordinary Time, our scripture readings will seek to remind us how to live so much in the Spirit that we remember to invite and inspire others to come alongside.

Verse 53 of our text today has the disciples “*continually in the Temple praising God,*” but that immersion in praise is merely the first step. In the midst of that worship, the Holy Spirit comes on them at Pentecost, and we know already that it sends them out profoundly changed. As we eat and drink today, celebrating the glory of Christ, let us commit to the ministry and mission to come. Amen.