

Your Turn

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Seventh Sunday of Easter (C)
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Text: Luke 24:44-53

A couple of weeks ago our neighbors who live across the street invited me over to show me something in their back yard. The husband proudly pulled back a tarp to reveal a gorgeous wooden canoe. He told me he got it from someone who put it together from a kit, but boy there must have been a lot of work involved. You could see every wooden piece and how they all fit perfectly together. And the whole thing had a beautiful blond finish that gleamed in the sunlight. And so the couple told me about their plans for the canoe. Maybe they would hoist it up and hang it in one of the rooms in their house. But then they reflected that the thing was designed to float after all, and maybe they should bring it with them on a family vacation. The husband hesitated, though, and said, "It's almost too beautiful to launch." And as the three of us pondered that idea, his wife broke the silence and said, "It's kind of like our faith, isn't it?"

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus pulls the tarp off of what he has given to his disciples. Even though we're now six weeks past Easter, Luke's gospel takes us back to that first Easter Sunday. Everything is happening at rocket speed. The women have come back after finding the tomb empty. Two disciples who had been traveling away from Jerusalem have raced back to tell about an encounter with the risen Jesus on the road. And now Jesus himself appears to the gathered disciples. His resurrection is like the finish on the canoe. It completes the whole picture, so that the scriptures and all his teachings make sense in a new and joyful and beautiful way. But this is not a vessel that is meant to be displayed and appreciated. It's got to be launched. It's meant to go somewhere!

"You are witnesses," Jesus says. That's the job he gave to those first disciples, and that's the job he gives to us, his modern-day disciples. We are witnesses, or *μάρτυρες* in Greek. If it sounds like "martyr," that's because it's the same word. Over time the word "martyr" took on a specific meaning—it refers to someone who gives his or her life as a way of bearing witness. In fact, some of the disciples *were* martyred, in the sense we understand. By remembering this, we begin to realize the sheer power of what they had experienced in Jesus, how their encounter with him had utterly transformed their lives and their priorities. But their sacrifice came as a consequence of accepting what Jesus was asking of them in this story, that they be witnesses. In any case, what's important is that, in Greek, the word "witness" is an active word. A witness is not someone who simply observes what happens. A witness is someone who gives testimony.

A witness tells what he or she experienced. No hearsay is allowed. A witness speaks only the truth as he or she experiences it and believes it. Jesus isn't asking his disciples to do any more or less than this, to bring to the world the story of Jesus' life and teaching, and their experience of the risen Jesus as a living presence. "Tell the world your story," Jesus is saying. "Share with them what you saw and heard and felt." This is a job that doesn't require a theological degree, or any special ability. All it takes

is the courage to speak about their experiences in the face of everything that would deny and suppress the truth at the center of that experience.

It takes courage to take the stand. Criminal defendants have gone free because witnesses are too afraid to testify against them. The first disciples faced the hostility from the same political and religious leaders that conspired to have Jesus killed. In our age faithful people risked their lives and their health to speak out against racial discrimination, bearing witness to the truth they had discovered through their faith and their experience, that in God's eyes there is no difference in worth between people of different races and sexes. Paul said as much in his letter to the Galatians, but some 2000 years later Martin Luther King, Jr., became a martyr, giving his life as a witness for this truth. Speaking the truth, bearing witness to God's love and God's hope for the world, to what we have experienced as disciples of Jesus, is a risky business. But that's what it means to follow Jesus. "You are witnesses," he tells us.

That sounds scary, doesn't it? But it's only half of what it means to be a witness.

Witnesses tell their story. They tell their story forthrightly and unapologetically. But they tell it in a way that points to a bigger story. In a criminal trial, the court is trying to establish the guilt or innocence of the accused, and the testimony of the witnesses is important because it tells the story about the alleged crime. Witnesses relate a story that is ultimately not about themselves, but which ties their story into a larger, more expansive and inclusive reality. Their stories are powerful because they're plugged into a bigger, brighter story.

The risen Jesus plugs his disciples in. He tells them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Jesus names the three parts of the Hebrew scriptures, pointing his disciples back to them. Read them again, he's saying. Luke tells us that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." "Thus it is written," he says, "that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day." Jesus explains that what happened to him, what his disciples saw and heard and felt—all of it was part of the story that the Hebrew scriptures tell, God's story about the world. The scriptures are witnesses too, Jesus is saying. Read these stories, he's saying, and learn from them what your story means. Learn what God is doing, and see that you are part of it! Truth-telling is risky, and witnessing to God's story can get you hurt or killed, but take courage and hope from knowing that it is *God's* story you are telling! It's *God's* story that you're part of!

The scriptures point to the story of Jesus. They help the disciples to make sense of what has happened to them, and to see themselves as part of the story of God renewing a broken world. But they also point beyond what has happened, into the future. The scriptures also say, Jesus tells them, "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [the Messiah's] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." The scriptures point to a story, a story that includes those who follow Jesus, that gives them meaning and hope. But it's a story that's not finished. It's a story waiting for us.

You are witnesses. You and I are disciples, and today we receive our commission from Jesus, our risen Lord. Those of us that are living right now on Good Friday, crying out as the crucified Jesus did for a God who seems distant in our struggles—our story plugs into God's story, a story that's still unfolding. Good Friday isn't the end. Those of us that have experienced new life and forgiveness and renewal in our faith, rejoicing with those disciples that found Jesus on that first Easter—our story plugs into God's story. Easter isn't the end either. The whole world, "all nations," as Jesus says, needs to hear the story of a God who bears our suffering as God's own in Jesus, and who overcomes even death. The world needs to hear the story of a God who will pay any

price to reclaim the people God loves from the grip of illness, sadness, guilt, emptiness —everything that separates us from the abundant life God wants for us.

But that's the big story we're commissioned to tell as Jesus takes his leave. That's the story that all of our little stories plug into. The boat is finished and ready to launch! Jesus isn't asking any more or less of us than to recognize where God's story touches our own, and to have the courage to name these truths to those around us: "You are witnesses of these things." Amen.