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Acts 1:6-14

IN NEED OF A WITNESS

It would be easy to become distracted by the way Jesus exits the scene in today's scripture reading from the Book of Acts, and to forget altogether what Jesus says to his disciples before he leaves them. The story today is about the last time the resurrected Jesus appears to his followers. According to the passage we read, Jesus blasts off into the heavens like a human rocket ship. Rather unusual for sure. Jesus' spectacular lift-off can preoccupy our attention, leaving us like those gob-smacked disciples, craning our necks and our attention heavenward after Jesus when, in fact, our eyes and our attention are supposed to be drawn downward—back to earth. Because when Jesus left us, he left us with an earthly task to carry out.

Just before Jesus rockets upward and out of sight, he tells his followers, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." You will be my *witnesses*. It turns out that Jesus leaves us with a purpose to carry out. And that purpose is to be witnesses for Jesus.

What does it mean to be a witness?

One understanding of what it means to be a witness is that witnesses tell what they have seen or experienced. Witnesses tell the truth as they know it. And that truth can be proclaimed with words or through actions.

As Christians we are called to witness, in our words and through our actions, to everything we know and have learned and have experienced about Jesus. This means that our lives are meant to be places where Jesus' love, grace, compassion, justice, generosity are displayed for all to see. And by that, I do not mean ordinary love, grace, compassion, generosity.

Ordinary love is, "I'll love you as long as you love me or if I get something out of it." Ordinary compassion extends kindness and care only to those who don't make big mistakes. Ordinary generosity is calculated and measured. Ordinary forgiveness is limited to small infractions and only for a limited number of infractions. But Jesus demonstrated radical love, radical generosity, radical compassion, radical forgiveness. And he then turns to us and says, "be my witnesses."

We have been given a mission by Jesus. You and I as individuals, and all of us together as a Church, have a mission with our lives: to be Jesus' witnesses. The Church is not a memorial society for a dead Jesus. The Church is the body of Christ, alive, and called to action. Our purpose, individually and collectively, is to witness to Jesus' radical love, grace, compassion, and generosity.

Notice that Jesus tells us "you will be *my* witnesses." Despite the brand names we might wear on our T-shirts or hoodies, we are not witnesses for Nike or UB or Penn State. Despite the logos on our devices we cling to so loyally and fanatically, we are not witnesses for Apple or Samsung. Despite our deep and abiding love for our family we are not witnesses for the Daub family, the Miller family, the Wilson family. Despite our strong ties to our congregation, we are not witnesses for University Presbyterian Church. We are *Jesus'* witnesses. That is the purpose of our lives: to be Jesus' witnesses, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health. Come what may, that is what our lives are to be about--witnessing to Jesus' radical, amazing love, compassion, grace, and generosity.

In a broken and divided world, the world desperately needs this witness. It needs *your* witness. It needs the Church's witness.

And yet, the tragedy is that throughout history, Christians and the Christian Church have often gotten this witnessing business so terribly wrong. Christians have hated and excluded,

killed and exploited, enslaved and subjugated peoples—all in the name of Christ. Too often Christians have witnessed to the message of Christ by coercing and intimidating and colonizing other people. Christians have and sometimes still do engage the world around them with an arrogance that comes from believing they have the exclusive truth and wisdom. And so witnessing to Christ has become a set of ideas and beliefs and traditions imposed on others, rather than living a radical way of love, rather than serving and honoring others with radical love and inclusion. At its worst, Christian witnessing has involved demanding that others conform to prescribed beliefs and behaviors. At its most benign, Christian witnessing has often assumed a paternalistic attitude toward others: “we know best.”

But witnessing isn't just about sharing what we know or believe to be true. Witnesses are also those who observe things. Witnessing involves listening and learning what others know and experience to be true. To witness is to listen to the suffering of others, to learn from the experiences of others, to listen to the wisdom of others. Think about what took place with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the aftermath of apartheid. Through the hearings that were held, the nation was assembled to witness the testimonies of those who were so profoundly injured by the cruelty and injustice of apartheid. Witnessing includes listening and learning. Witnessing involves really seeing another person and honoring them.

Where do you need a witness? What secret burden do you carry, unseen or unknown by others? What life experiences have you gone through that need honoring, that need acknowledging? What heartache or sorrow lies upon your soul that needs witnessing—your story, your pain? That is what Jesus does for us. Jesus entered this world to bear witness to human realities: to our struggles, to our sorrows, to our imperfections and failings, to our triumphs and to our joys. He witnesses these realities with love, compassion, and forgiveness,

and by doing so, he offers healing. And he tells us, his followers, “go be my witnesses.” Go and do likewise.

Who in your life needs you to witness their story? To listen and to learn. To see them, to really see them? Who in our community needs us to hear their story, their struggle, to learn from their wisdom, to hear about their experiences?

The Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin, in California, has just concluded a compelling way of witnessing to Christ. From the middle of April through the middle of May, members of the Diocese embarked on an 1,100 mile pilgrimage within the boundaries of the Diocese. It was called “El Camino de la Pascua,” which means “The Way of Easter,” and its mission was for the members of the Diocese to journey, mostly on foot, to a wide range of sites that represented what the Diocese described as “contemporary places of crucifixion and resurrection.” Some of the pilgrims walked the entire 1,100 miles while others journeyed just a portion of el camino. Each night the pilgrims would stop at a host site where they would share a meal with people of that community and sleep in community homes or churches. The pilgrimage included visiting such sites as homeless shelters and food pantries, meeting with farm workers and learning about their working conditions, visiting the historic site of the Manzanar internment camp which held Japanese-Americans during World War II, journeying to a privately run detention center holding migrants awaiting court hearings, and visiting community gardens, medical clinics, and even a National Park. The goal at each site was to listen and to learn. One of the camino’s leaders emphasized that they did not wish to swoop in and presume the church had all the answers. Instead, she said, “We’re really here to be receptors, to be sponges, to learn as much as we can and take that learning and continue putting it forward in action and in justice work.”

Consider how this pilgrimage offered a compelling witness. First, the pilgrims witnessed by listening: by hearing other people's stories of struggle and triumph, injustice and heartbreak. Those on the pilgrimage witnessed places of suffering and places of hope and new life. And the pilgrimage itself offered a witness to the wider world of a community of Christians who cared about the real lives of their neighbors, often the least and the forgotten.

But we don't have to journey 1,100 miles to bear witness to the presence and love of Christ. Our daily journeys in our ordinary lives will give us plenty of opportunities. In our encounters with others, who is it we see? It is easy for us to spot their flaws, their failings, their many irritating qualities, their objectionable habits or beliefs, their differences from ourselves. But can we see in others, even those most objectionable to us, can we see in them the presence of the Christ? Imagine what might change if we witnessed the Christ in them, the presence of what is good and beautiful, and we honored that which we found there, and then treated them accordingly.

That's what Jesus does for us. He sees what is holy in us, treats us accordingly, and by doing so, he draws the holy to the surface. And having brought the holy to the surface, Jesus gives us a holy task for our lives. "Be my witnesses," he tells us. "Be my witnesses in Buffalo, and Amherst, and Tonawanda, and in the United States, and to the ends of the earth."