

Speak Up Speak Out

Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

Last weekend when Nola's family gathered after her aunt's interment to share stories of our memories of her, her aunt's youngest sister shared that her best memory came from the fact that her older sister had been a woman of faith. She told us that because of Victoria's influence she herself at the age of eight had committed her life to following the way of Jesus and that the relationship had continued to sustain her through her 89 years of living. In some circles what she told us would be called witnessing.

As we are continue the season of Easter my question this morning is: Will you be an Easter witness? That's a strange question. There were no eye witnesses to the raising of crucified Jesus from the dead. Nobody saw him stride forth from the tomb. And yet, in this morning's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, "You are witnesses."

Of course, we use that word witness in two ways. First, to be a witness is to be someone who has seen and heard something. Second, to be a witness is to be someone who speaks up, someone who tells what has been seen and heard. And it is in that second sense that Jesus commissions us to be witnesses.

Yet some Christians are suspicious of other Christians being witnesses.

"For two thousand years the church has done too much talking and not enough listening," said the theology student. "I think today's Christians must learn to do more listening. Humbly, openly, we need to hear what the world has to say to us before we presume to speak to the world."

And you can see her point. The so called pushy, arrogant, assertive Christian, attempting to ram the faith down someone else's throat before taking the time to learn anything about the other person—that sort of "evangelism" has given Christianity a bad name.

Frankly, I'm not sure that our chief problem as the Christians who worship in this congregation is that we have been too pushy with the gospel. For those of us in the United Church there's not too many of us that have been overbearing or arrogant in our Christian witness. No, our problem is often that we have been silent. We have lost our desire to share our faith with others—have lost even our ability to find the words to make a witness.

There is another big problem with this notion that Christians must do more listening and less talking about our faith—that we must simply, humbly, quietly “be with others” (Sam Wells) and let them do the talking and witnessing to us. The problem with that rather passive posture is Easter.

Behind the charge that Christians have done too much talking, pushing, arguing, preaching, and speaking is often the assumption that the Christian faith is something that everybody already knows, sort of. Behind the call just to “be with” others and not “preach” to them is the assumption that we are fortunate enough to live in a basically Christian land where people become Christians simply by being lucky enough to have been born here rather than elsewhere. Christianity, so this line of reasoning goes, is roughly synonymous with being a thinking, caring, sensitive person. The gospel is innate, inborn, something that only awaits discovery within you and then expression by you.

But then comes the resurrection of crucified Jesus.

I'm telling you that you can sit alone and be quiet for hours, take long walks alone in the woods, or sit by the sea and watch the waves roll in. You can take a crash course in the noble beliefs of the world's great religions. You can delve into the deepest recesses of your own ego, and you will never, ever come to a notion that God Almighty would come to earth and be vilified and derided, then tortured to death by a consortium of religious and governmental leaders, and then—rise from the dead and return to the very people who betrayed and forsook him.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is not an innate human idea to be discovered and

uncovered within all thinking, caring, sensitive people. We come into this world with great talents and abilities that await our discovery and development. But none of us comes into the world thinking, "I think God raised crucified Jesus from the dead and thereby showed us the truth about God."

The death and resurrection of Jesus is not a human idea, some wish that wells up within us when we are at our best. The death and resurrection of Jesus is an event, something that happened outside of us rather than within us.

And that's why we've got to speak up and speak out, to tell the world that something has happened in the world, an event not of our own devising: God has raised Jesus from the dead. We've got to testify that in Easter it is as if God said, "You want to know who I am, whose side I'm on, what I am up to in the world? Then look at this, the only person I've ever raised from the dead—Jesus Christ."

When we look at Jesus—who suffered and died with all of us who suffer and die, Jesus who went head-to-head with the principalities and powers, who angered the establishment so much that they colluded to torture him to death, and then was raised up by God on the third day as if to say to all of those powers, "You can't defeat my intentions for the world, so I'll defeat you"—we believe that in looking at that, we have seen as much of God as we ever hope to see.

The glorious event of the resurrection doesn't need anything from us to prove that or add to that. All that's needed now is witnesses.

If you think back over the scripture that we've been studying and proclaiming over the past couple of Sundays, you will note a theme. The scripture not only reports that crucified Jesus was raised from the dead but then has Jesus, in every case, commission his once disheartened followers to go tell somebody that he has been raised.

Easter and public witness just go together. There's no way that the world can know the truth

about God and the truth of its own destiny without somebody with the courage to speak up and speak out to the world, to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth that God raised crucified Jesus from the dead.

Sure, our witness can be given humbly; it can be rendered after we have patiently, openly listened to others. But at some point we must speak, must tell others what has happened to us, that which we have seen and heard. We must become Christ's witnesses or the world cannot know the truth about God and the world's true destiny.

In today's Gospel the risen Christ again appears before his followers. Note that the risen Christ did not merely rise from the dead but also repeatedly sought out his followers and spoke to them. (Last Sunday we witnessed Jesus even going through locked doors to get to them.) He not only speaks to them (note this carefully) but also commissions them, sends them out, tells them to go tell somebody what they have seen and heard. Easter and commissioning go together.

We are Easter people, not only in the sense that we have seen into the very heart of God, but in the sense that we are Easter witnesses. Here is good news we can't keep to ourselves. And I tell you, outside our church doors there are people who are literally dying to get the news of Easter. Out there is someone who has given up. She had hopes and dreams. She worked to make her dreams a reality, but time and again she was pushed back or denied opportunity because of her race, because some people, in their sin, couldn't look at the colour of her skin and see her for the wonderfully vibrant human being that she is. She needs to hear that her future is not completely in her hands or the hands of her racist detractors.

I'm seeing someone in the world who has just received a bleak diagnosis. She feels so very much alone. Most of her family is gone, and she stopped coming to church years ago. Now is the time that she needs to hear that there is hope beyond her positive thinking and her attempts to

summon up hope on her own.

There's somebody who has been working in the inner city of one of our great urban centers. She has been operating a ministry that gives free meals to those in need, a safe place to sleep, and love and comfort. She's been working at this ministry for a decade now. At first, she was filled with enthusiasm for her work. She got a dozen Christian congregations to work with her and to support her with money and volunteers.

But over the years, her enthusiasm has waned. Every week she has to go door-to-door begging for funds. Each year the number of those in need grows. As word has gotten around town about the warm welcome that people receive at her ministry, the numbers of people seeking help has increased astronomically. She is just about to give up.

Now she needs a reason to keep going, a source of continuing energy. She needs desperately to know that God is behind her work, that ultimately her attempts to minister to "the least of these" are not in vain.

If we don't step up and obey Jesus and become witnesses to the resurrection, how will people know the truth? How will they get the message that death is not indomitable, that evil does not have the last word, that there is hope even in seemingly hopeless situations, if there is not a witness to tell them?

Easter's message is not natural. What's natural is death, defeat, and the sense of hopelessness that comes when you think that there is no future other than the one you create. Therefore, somebody has got to love people enough to give them the news—Christ is risen!

Will you be a witness to what you have seen and heard on Easter? Will you testify to and point to the great victory that has occurred at the empty tomb? There are people out there, sometimes people in here, who are dying to get the news.

Will you be a witness? Amen.