

“Be My Witnesses”

Most of us don't like goodbyes. It's not easy to say good-bye. The longer the anticipated separation, the harder it is to say good-bye. And the more you care about someone, the harder it is to say good-bye; to look intently at a beloved face, committing every detail, consigning every feature, into the channels of memory.

This one you love is going on a journey. Maybe it's a long journey. Maybe it's a dangerous journey. Maybe it's the final journey. Will you ever be together again? How will you manage when he or she is gone? What will you do? Each gesture, each glance, each word becomes laden with meaning. Especially the words. What's the last thing this person, so closely connected to you, will say?

Last words carry great significance. That's why the last words of well-known people are recorded for posterity. That's why anthologies are compiled and published, containing the last words of famous figures of history. Last words are important.

In today's Ascension Sunday reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus has gathered the eleven to say good-bye, to offer his last words to them. These most intimate friends have been with him since the beginning of his earthly ministry. They have walked with him, listened to him, been with him at table, called him Teacher, Master, Lord. They

have experienced the terror of his death and the joy of his resurrection. In the forty days since he was raised from the dead, he has appeared to them proclaiming God's kingdom.

On this day of Jesus' departure, how do you imagine the eleven must have felt? Don't you think they must have been subject to every emotion that you and I feel when saying farewell to one so close? Anxiously, they search his face, as, in these final moments, Jesus prepares his followers for life without his physical presence. And his last words to them are these: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

Witnesses. You shall be my witnesses. In Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, that icon of Southern womanhood, Scarlett O'Hara, swears, "as God is my witness...as God is my witness..." But it seems to me that Scarlett has it backwards. You and I are God's witnesses, not the other way around. A witness has been defined as "someone who by explanation and demonstration gives audible and visible evidence of what he has seen and heard without being deterred by the consequences of his action."

On the Mount of Olives, forty days after the resurrection, Jesus calls the eleven to be his witnesses. But is this band of Galileans ready to witness? The gospels tell us that these first disciples have misunderstood Jesus and his message. They have deserted. They have denied. They have doubted. They have dreaded the consequences of following Jesus.

My brothers and sisters, in the pages of scripture, we have met the disciples. And they are us! We too have misunderstood. We too have doubted and deserted and denied, and wondered whether the cost of discipleship may be more than we are prepared to offer.

And so Jesus charges them—and us—with waiting; waiting until the promised Spirit of God has come upon them. Stay in Jerusalem and wait, he orders. Be my witnesses, but first—wait.

We're not very good at waiting, are we? We like to be self-sufficient and not dependent on anyone or anything. We like to be motivated self-starters who decide for ourselves when it's time to spring into action. When we understand that there's work to be done—even work in God's kingdom—we can't wait to get out of our Jerusalems and get started.

But that's not what we're called to do. The Lord of all time is in charge of your schedule and mine, not we ourselves. Ours is the task of surrendering the need to control the timetable, to trust the One who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. It's not given to us to know the times and the seasons fixed by the authority of God.

So we wait. And the waiting shapes us. For, patterning our common life after those first disciples, we gather in unity. As a gathered community, we pray. As C. S. Lewis put it, “prayer doesn't change God; it changes us.” In the fullness of time, in God's own perfect time, the Holy Spirit comes to deepen understanding, to remind of all that Jesus

has said, to empower. In waiting for the promptings of the Spirit, Christ's witnesses *prepare*.

Where will this witness take us? Jesus commands that we witness in Jerusalem. You and I are to be his witnesses right here at home: in our own neighborhoods, in these island communities, in the holy city of Charleston and in the lowcountry—throughout *our* Jerusalem. Christ's witnesses *care*.

Jesus commands that we witness in all Judea and Samaria. For you and me, that means we are to be his witnesses in this state and in this country, wherever our journeys take us, wherever we have opportunity—even if, in *our* Samaria, the customs and the people seem strange, even if ancestral hostility existed between our region and theirs, even if there are consequences to our witnessing. We have only to listen to the news to know that our nation has become a mission field in urgent need of hearing the message of God's redeeming love. Christ's witnesses *dare*.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus of Nazareth didn't stay long in one place. He was continually on the move. Following the example of Christ, John Wesley served as an itinerant preacher and insisted that his Methodist ministers itinerate as well. Wesley affirmed that "the world is my parish," for Jesus commands that we witness to the end of the earth. We are to be his witnesses in the global community, and in this work, various tools are at our disposal. With the internet, we citizens of the

twenty-first century have the capability to send information instantaneously to every corner of the world. Through the rich connectional resources of the United Methodist Church, through its general boards and agencies and through our apportioned giving, we witness in faraway lands to the God who is king of all nations. Christ's witnesses *share*.

We've reflected on *when* we are to witness and *where* we are to witness. But its most compelling aspect is the *what* of our witness: its content. Our Lord has been raised from the dead and has ascended! Seated at the right hand of the Father, above every name and rule and dominion—according to the author of Ephesians—Christ is no longer confined by time and space, but through the Spirit's power, present and accessible in all times and in all places. Christ lives today!

At his ascension, divine truth and testimony pass from Jesus to his apostles: to those he *sends* to be his witnesses. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and across centuries of Christian tradition, that call to witness is handed down to you and me. We are not to stand gazing up into heaven. We have God's work to do, and that work is to witness: to prepare, to care, to dare, to share. As eyewitnesses, Peter, James, John, and the others saw and heard what we cannot see and hear. But we witness to how we have *seen* this risen and ascended Lord working in our lives and in the lives of others. And we witness to what we have

heard: how God has spoken through God's holy word and has spoken to our hearts in a still, small voice.

On this final Sunday of Easter, we rejoice and celebrate! Raised from the dead, our Lord has ascended into glorious heavenly places, where he has prepared a table for you. As a foretaste of that eternal banquet, he meets you today, becomes present to you, communes with you, his witnesses, in this holy meal. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.