Sermon
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Easter Vigil
Year A 4-23-11
MT 28: 1-10

Witnesses to the Resurrection

ALLELUIA! Christ is RISEN!

We have been preparing throughout LENT for this day. We have journeyed far with Jesus this season - through temptations and fasting in the wilderness to his triumphal arrival in Jerusalem.

We have been a part of a sacred meal and learned through foot washing what it means to love one another, and then yesterday we anguished as he was crucified. And today, right now we celebrate his RESURRECTION!

On this most holy night, we are united with Christians around the world gathered for Vigil and prayer to commemorate the passing of Jesus from death to new life!

This Resurrection event is the center of our Christian life and faith. This is the gospel that the disciples proclaimed to the world and it is our participation in the resurrection story that makes us one in Christ. This is the foundation on which our faith is built.

Given this reality, it is amazing to me that there are no New Testament accounts of Jesus’ actual resurrection; there are only stories of the empty tomb and appearances of the risen Jesus. The empty tomb requires the faith of the people who trust that Jesus was raised from the dead.

This story, however, creates enormous difficulties because it tries to do something that is by definition impossible: to prove the resurrection of Jesus objectively to those who do not believe.

But it seems that God didn’t have any intention of proving the resurrection to anyone other than the followers of Jesus. This is immediately evident in our gospel when we are told that the guards were so afraid that they shook and became like dead men. So they were basically unconscious and unaware of what was happening.

The original message of the resurrection was not intended to convince others of a supernatural event. The message was to motivate the faithful into action!

The first people mobilized by this event were the women. Despite their fear at the tomb, the women continued to act faithfully. They witnessed the empty tomb and were told that Jesus has been raised from the dead. They women were given instructions by the angel
and by Jesus: Do not be afraid, go and tell the brothers to go to Galilee where they will see the Risen One.

Recall that none of the male disciples are present at the tomb in Matthew’s story. So these women are the first witnesses to the resurrection and the first evangelists and missionaries as they go out to proclaim the good news of the resurrection to the male disciples.

The question then becomes – do these disciples who were not present believe the stories of these witnesses? Do we, 2000 years later believe the testimony of these individuals?

Does God really use witnesses in the world? Isn’t there a better way that God could communicate with us today other than through some human testimony that was given so long ago?

What does it take to be a witness to the resurrected Christ anyway?

Witnesses are gifted with the task of telling the story of what they have seen and heard. They have to do it in a credible way so that others who were not there can experience the living presence of God. What’s more, they have to tell the story of their personal experience without the benefit of any hard evidence to back up their claim.

A Witness for Christ sees or experiences something and then is moved to write or tell about it. In fact, our whole faith tradition is based on testimony that is connected to a long sequence of witnesses.

The women in today’s gospel witnessed an empty tomb and then shared their testimony with others. These witnesses did not convince everyone all at once.

But the women knew. They had been there while Jesus was carrying his cross through the streets of Jerusalem. These women followed him all the way up to the place of the skull and watched the soldiers nail him to the crossbeam. These women stood by and kept vigil while the life slowly crept of Jesus. Then when his body was taken down, these women walked to the tomb to watch where his body was laid.

If the Sabbath hadn’t been upon them, these women would have properly prepared Jesus’ body for burial, but there was no time. They had to leave the tomb in order to participate in Sabbath observance. But they were ready and they came back to the site where Jesus’ body was laid as soon as their religious observance was over. These women were witnesses to the suffering and death of Jesus - just as they had been witnesses to Jesus’ life and teaching.

The women showed up at the tomb expecting one thing and found something completely different. They witnessed an earthquake and an angel of the Lord rolling away the stone that covered the tomb.
The guards were paralyzed at the sight and the women were terrified! Their hearts were pounding, their bodies trembling, they couldn’t run, they couldn’t scream, they could only stand there, frozen in fear.

And then the angel spoke and told them not to be afraid. They were invited to see the empty tomb and then instructed to go and tell the others that Jesus had risen. With fear and excitement the women hurried off to tell the other disciples what they had seen and heard.

Amazement is often a first response for a witness. These women were awe struck at all they had just witnessed in such a short period of time. Rather than ignoring their experience they ran off to tell their stories. Thanks to the actions of these first witnesses and their testimony, there came later sets of witnesses who passed on the good news.

But sometimes, stories of the other-worldly are too weird to be taken seriously, and often the tellers of the stories are weirder yet, in which case they and their testimony are quickly dismissed.

Think about people who claim to have seen UFO’s. Are they taken seriously in the mainstream or do most of us dismiss them? I wonder if the women thought about how crazy their story was going to sound to the other disciples? Did they pause to consider that they might not be believed?

Witnesses typically put their reputations on the line whenever they testify to some event. The more outlandish their story, the more risk they are taking. Will they be discredited? Will they be cast aside as lunatics or as misguided individuals?

When testimony shakes up the known or accepted reality that a given community operates out of, the witnesses become a threat to the homeostasis of that group. The hearers either have to dismiss the witnesses as non-credible or the listeners have to change some of their thoughts, attitudes and behaviors. Change however, is something that none of us really want because it takes us out of our comfort zone. Change is hard for everybody, yet we all experience it on a regular basis.

Things didn’t work out the way the women had anticipated. The women’s dreams about a new kingdom with Jesus here on earth had been shattered just a few days ago. Their comfortable, safe world had been turned upside down and they were hanging onto the now dead ideals of the teacher who was also dead and gone.

But today things were completely different. They saw the angel and the empty tomb and they ran into the risen Lord! How could their human minds take in such contradictory images?

Fortunately for us, God’s actions are beyond our limited comprehension. These women were able to grasp a new reality as a new hope arose within them. They allowed God’s
love and action to change their hearts and their minds. They didn’t cling to their old perspectives but embraced a new reality that was presented to them.

How difficult is that for us to do? Can we let go of everything we trust and believe in when God enters our life? This is what the women were asked to do and this is what we are called to as well.

When we encounter God’s action in the world and in our lives, our first response is usually one of awe. We see how blessed we are and we are moved to take action ourselves - to share the unbelievable goodness that we have just received from the almighty. Sometimes we may feel too embarrassed to say anything, but we must be bold, just as the women were bold.

These women testified to the truth that they had seen and heard. They walked through the fear and ran into the joy and excitement that awaited them.

Thanks to these women, we who were not there 20 centuries ago to witness the resurrection have heard their story and their testimony so that we may believe. Nothing has been proven, no scientific evidence or photographs have been produced but yet we believe. The power of a witness and their testimony is incredible!

Our job as believers in the 21st century is to be witnesses to the resurrection even though we are two thousand years removed from the historical event. Our Christian faith empowers us to continue sharing and passing on this testimony to others who come after us.

Let us go forth from this place as witnesses to the great and marvelous deed that God has done for us in the Resurrection!

Christ is Risen! ALLELUIA!