

Being a Witness
The Rev. Amy Spagna
April 14, 2024 – Easter 3B
Acts 3:12-19, Luke 24:36b-48

As a high school student in central Virginia in the early 1990s, the lay of the religious landscape was quite different than it is in Vermont in 2024. We had the gift of being, geographically speaking, smack dab in between the major televangelists, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. Aside from them – whom we all tried hard to just ignore - there were churches everywhere, and it seemed like everyone belonged to one or another of them. Episcopalians were a distinct minority, which made for some interesting conversations in the cafeteria and on band trips. I recall one in particular which ended with a friend having signed my yearbook with the tagline, “Remember, you EPISCOPAL, Baptists are better.”

In that point in our careers as evangelists, we were just becoming fluent in the language of death and resurrection and salvation. We shared what we were learning in our churches and youth groups in simpler, and more overt, ways than we do as adults. I learned very early on that Episcopalians find it inappropriate to beat others over the head with what we believe. The proper process involved a quiet demonstration of “faith,” with or without an invitation to come to worship with us and see exactly what we meant. My inability to do things like quote Scripture by chapter and verse, or to say I was definitely “saved” seemed odd to my mostly Baptist and Pentecostal peers. However, this idea of “witnessing” like they did seemed equally odd to me. I sure didn't want to be like the schoolmates who sang, “Give me that old time religion” on the bus to marching band competitions, quoted Scripture, and wore Jesus t-shirts. It just didn't fit with the

Episcopal ethos of, “believe, but don’t talk about it in public,” at least not in a way that made a whole lot of sense to my 17-year-old self.

What it means to be a witness is the theme of this morning’s readings. all of the people involved in them saw the Crucifixion, saw Jesus alive on that first Easter morning, and had to go and tell others about it. That’s what being a witness means: you saw it, you share in it, you’re obligated to tell someone about it. That’s it. The Greek word for witnesses, *martyres*, originally had legal obligations attached to it. Much like now, the expectation was that someone who was a witness to an event would tell the truth about it, or face punishment. It’s where we get the word *martyr* – that is, one who suffers, or is killed, on behalf of a given belief or cause. For Christians living at the time the gospels were recorded, being arrested, imprisoned, and executed because of their faith was a distinct possibility. Even without that threat, their having put faith in Jesus’ life and teaching had led to a radical change in the way they lived. That was certainly the case for Peter, Mary Magdalene, and the rest of the disciples. Unfortunately most of what we have committed to paper is Peter’s transformation from fisherman to eloquent preacher, though it is easy to imagine that Mary and the rest would have been similarly enabled to use their gifts in service of the message.

As for the crowds who were listening to Peter preach afterward, they too were changed. Those changes included mass baptisms, and radical changes that included things like “... as many as owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold... and it was distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4:34-35, NRSV). The presence of so many different people in the crowds who responded to Peter not only helps to reinforce the Lucan ideal that, “Jesus is for everyone,” but it also serves as

a reminder that the events of Easter aren't just something to be shrugged off in the midst of planning for the next thing. They're real, and they matter, as does our continuing to tell and participate in the story. The thing is, we do bear witness in the same sense as Peter did, whether we're aware of it or not. We tell others about what matters to us all the time – that show we saw, what our kids are up to, and even what we're having for lunch are all things to which we bear witness. We're just not used to thinking about doing it in terms of our faith. However, when we do, it can be just as simple as telling others where we felt God was at work – which can be through that show we saw, what our kids are up to, or how our lunches ended up in front of us.¹

The world certainly doesn't encourage us to think that way, does it? And yet, even here "in church," it's hard to talk about it. We might think we lack the right words or the authority to do it. Or we might be acting like typical New Englanders for whom these things are taken for granted and so don't need to be topics of conversation. How do we take the truths we whisper to one another inside these walls out into the world? It could be doing as some of my high school classmates did, and asking people at random if they're saved. Or it could be quietly giving our time, talent, and treasure to benefit someone else. We don't have to preach like Peter or pray like Paul, as the spiritual *There Is a Balm in Gilead* suggests. We just have to act as if we're in Galilee and waiting for Jesus' promised arrival.

As the Presiding Bishop suggested in a video he made at the beginning of his term in 2015, Galilee is everywhere: "[It] is a way of talking about the world. Galilee. In the streets of the city. Galilee. In our rural communities. Galilee in our hospitals. Galilee

¹ David Lose, "Witnesses." <http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/witnesses> [accessed April 11, 2024].

in our office places. Galilee where God's children live and dwell there. In Galilee you will meet the living Christ for He has already gone ahead of you... Now is our time to go. To go into the world to share the good news of God and Jesus Christ. To go into the world and help to be agents and instruments of God's reconciliation. To go into the world, let the world know that there is a God who loves us, a God who will not let us go, and that that love can set us all free."²

² The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, "Video: Presiding Bishop Michael Curry: 'This is the Jesus Movement.'" <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2015/11/02/video-presiding-bishop-michael-curry-this-is-the-jesus-movement/> [accessed April 11, 2024].