**WILL YOU BE A WITNESS?**

**1 John 3:1-7**

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.

5 You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.

7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

**Luke 24:36b-48**

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

38 He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?

39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."

40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"

42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish,

43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-- that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,

47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

48 You are witnesses of these things.

**SERMON**

In this week’s Gospel reading, Jesus finds himself struggling to convince his disciples that he’s not dead.  It’s a bizarre predicament to be in, if you think about it.  Imagine walking into a room and having your closest friends scream, faint, or shrink away in terror at the sight of you. Imagine having to explain to them over and over again that you’re not a ghost, a zombie, a demon, or a delusion.  That you are, in fact, *real* — alive, approachable, and trustworthy.  How would you make your case?  What would you say or do to calm their fears?

Jesus, standing among his closest friends, the disciples – representing us, try to calm them, saying “*Shalom*!” Loosely translated, it means “Peace be with you.” But, in reality, it means so much more. It conveys that all is well with the world, all is just, all is fair, all is the way God means it to be. Appropriately the disciples are startled – the dead one is on the loose. And terrified – because, holy moly, here he is! And he still has *shalom* on his mind. Always has, always will, always does.

Jesus then asks the disciples, “Why are you frightened?” Could it be because the last time we saw you, you were dead, hanging on a Roman cross, soldiers all around, angry people all around, and, well, as far as we knew, dead is dead?

So, Jesus held out his hands. “Look at my hands, see my feet”. It’s easy to gloss over this detail, but again, consider its strangeness.  We don’t usually identify each other by our hands and feet.  If I’m trying to find a friend or family member in a crowd, I scan faces.  I look for the smile, the hair, or the eyes I recognize.  I might mark the person’s height or build. But *hands and feet?*  How many of our friends even know what our feet look like?

What’s remarkable about Jesus is that he chooses the most revealing aspect of himself to share first.  His hands and feet bear unmistakable signs of his crucifixion, his defeat, and his vulnerability.  They’re not mended and manicured; I imagine he winces when his disciples poke the jagged nails and mangled musculature.  His are fresh wounds, still raw and gaping.

Fun fact - among the ghost tests in antiquity, one could check extremities where bones were evident (namely, hands and feet), make sure that a person’s feet were touching the ground, and show one’s teeth and eat food. This is what Jesus did, according to Luke.

You see, it was important, crucial, for Luke to make the point that Jesus was ALIVE and to make it as strongly as possible because there were people in that day who believed that God did not really become a human being in the person of Jesus. The notion was that flesh was evil...and God would not and could not become flesh and blood because the material and physical world were inferior to the "spiritual."

Luke wants to make it clear that the physical, earthly, flesh and blood world is real and valuable. Real and valuable enough for God to inhabit in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and in the person of the Risen Lord. To affirm the resurrection is not to affirm that Jesus is taken out of this world. Luke puts the Risen Christ right back into the world. Luke wants the reader to know that the sacred center of life is still in the world, in the flesh and blood, material world. THIS is where God is active and alive. THIS is where people can know God and where God lives with and empowers people...IN THE FLESH! The dwelling place of God is not off in the world of the spirit somewhere, but within this physical world in which we live.

"Here, touch my hands and my feet," Jesus says to his disciples. "Get in touch with the physical scars, the bodily pain of human beings. Touch the hurts of real people, and you touch me." It reminds us that the daily ministry of the church of Jesus Christ is to be armpit deep in the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual...human hurts of people in our church, our community, and our world.

So also, when Jesus asked for fish, it was to prove that he is human, yes, but maybe it also suggests that perhaps he was hungry for something more. Remember, Jesus was vexed with his contemporary religionists. He felt that the application of Torah, application of the Law and the Prophets, had gone off in direction not of God’s liking. Instead of bringing God’s people, all people, together, God’s 638 rules, were being used to separate people more than bring them together. Maybe that is what made Jesus hungry – hungry for freedom, shalom and justice for all people – not some people, not most people, not lots of people. All people. Maybe, therefore, the greeting, shalom.

Had he not made it clear that the hungry were to be fed? The naked clothed? The prisoner visited? The sick made well? The stranger, the resident alien as the Bible calls them, welcomed? The thirsty given something to assuage their thirst? Had he not self-identified with all these people, including lepers, women, orphans, children, servants, gentiles and Jews? Has he not tended to them in the physical world?

Is it too difficult to see that Jesus, who promises to be present in the bread and the wine, Jesus who promises that he is the stranger, he is the prisoner, he is the leper, he is the beggar on the street, he is the prostitute, sinner, the woman who is bleeding to death, the mother or father begging for their child’s life, and a tax collector; a Jesus who endlessly teaches about our relationship to the land, the earth, in countless agricultural stories, parables and analogies; a Jesus who challenges every sovereign temporal and religious power – is it too difficult to see that having been raised from being three days dead and gone and now returned and back with us for all eternity, that this Jesus whom we are to proclaim in all that we do and all that we say wants something more than a piece of broiled fish when he asks, “Have you anything to eat?”

Jesus is hungry. He wants us to be hungry too. And that may be why he address his disciples, he does not say: “you *will* be witnesses, or “please be witnesses.” Not, “consider being witnesses if you have time.” No, he said: “you are witnesses of these things.” We are witnesses. It is not voluntary, but a state of being. And this means speaking up, telling what has been seen and heard. And it is in that way that Jesus commissions us to be witnesses.

I suspect that for many of us, hearing that we are witnesses is not necessarily good news. We remember how often we have declined our identity; how often we have deferred testimony to others. We remember how often we have determined that our witness wouldn’t make a difference anyway, so why bother? But, in doing so, we deny the truth of who we are and who Jesus needs us to be. “We are witnesses” is not only who we are but also then how others see God to be. “We are witnesses” gives witness to our own selves, our own faith, our own belief. And that is the hardest truth to hear -- that perhaps we don’t believe in the identity God has given us, don’t believe God needs it, don’t believe others will see it, don’t believe that it actually matters.

“We are witnesses” does not depend on our acceptance or agreement or approval; it does not depend on our readiness or recognition or responsiveness. “We are witnesses” just is. Because, 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. She needs to hear that her future is not completely in her hands or the hands of her racist detractors. There is someone in the world who has just received a bleak diagnosis. He feels so alone. Most of his family is gone, and he stopped coming to church years ago. Now is the time that he needs to hear that there is hope beyond his positive thinking.

So rather than continue in our ceaseless attempts to convince ourselves we have a choice, that we can carry out this occupation just as soon as we are adequately prepared, that we can graciously, even politely and respectfully, eschew God’s claim on us, why not try it on and see what it feels like? Wear it around, maybe fake it till you make it, if you will. Who knows? Maybe then we might start to believe it.

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? How can Jesus be alive, taking care of his children, here and now, in our world, if we do not show our hands and feet; being physically present to those who need it?

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? Will you step out and do what it takes – to take care of the least of these; to the people out there, sometimes people in here, who are dying to get the news; to testify to the aliveness of God in the resurrection, not just spiritually, but physically.

Will you be a witness?

Because witnessing is not optional. It’s not an intermittent activity of faith. It’s not something you can decide to do one day and then resolve to take the next day off. It’s constant. It’s a way of life. It’s who you are. And it’s time, more than time when it’s post-resurrection time, to get used to it.