

You are Witnesses — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Luke 24:36-48

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 04-18-2021

When reading the Gospel of Luke's accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, it is evident that Luke wants to stress that Jesus is resurrected as a fully flesh, human being. Jesus was not a ghost or an apparition – even though his actual appearance may seem that way.

Prior to the text I will be reading in a moment, the women at the Tomb have been told of Jesus' resurrection and Jesus himself has walked along and then had a meal with the two men walking to Emmaus.

As I read our text for this morning, I want you to put yourself in with the group of disciples. I also want you to consider what it is that is one of the most important things we are called to do as followers of Jesus Christ.

Luke, Chapter 24, verses 36-48,

³⁶ 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.ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

If you were to have asked me growing up or even up through college and seminary, “why am I a Christian?” I would probably have told you so I can go to Heaven when I die.

That is a focus for many people.

I have even heard of viewed, kind of tongue-in-cheek, as “fire-insurance.” You believe in Jesus; you don’t go to Hell.

Is that all there is to it?

We believe in Jesus solely so we get to go to Heaven?

I invite you to look at the Gospels and their accounts of Jesus’ teachings and directives following his resurrection.

They say very little, if anything, about our going to Heaven. While that is an important aspect of our faith, to summarize a teaching by Dallas Willard, "The gospel is less about how to get into the Kingdom of Heaven when you die and more about how you live in the Kingdom of Heaven before you die."ⁱⁱ

Think about today's text.

This happens after the two men return to Jerusalem from Emmaus. Jesus has appeared to them and had meal with them. It was in the blessing and breaking of the bread that Jesus' identity became known to them. They then rushed back to the disciples to tell them what they knew.

The events of today's passage picks up at this point, "While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you.""

The passage tells us that they were frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost. The fear is understandable. In their day as in our day, a dead person does not just come back to life. Even with the reports from the others who had encountered the risen Jesus, it is natural that they were frightened.

Jesus shows the disciples his hands and feet (presumably to show the scars from the crucifixion). And then Jesus asks if the disciples if they have something for him to eat.

Ghosts do not eat.

Jesus was not *and is not* a ghost.

The key verses from today's passage are 44-48.

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.

Look closely:

- Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures;
- the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day;
- repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

And the biggie:

- You are witnesses of these things.

The call of Jesus Christ is to be a witness.

What are we witness to? We are called to be witnesses to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

If our focus is only on how to get into Heaven, then we have not been paying attention to Jesus.

Jesus' ministry was all about reaching out to those on the margins. He had dinner with "sinners and prostitutes." He cured the sick. He fed the hungry.

Matthew, chapter 25, verses 31 to 46 should be our mission, our job description if you will. Highlighting verses 35-40:

³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Jesus did not come to earth JUST so we can get into Heaven.

Jesus came to *transform* his followers into people who *love* like he loves and who *serve* like he serves.

Jesus comes and tells his disciples to not be afraid. He shows them he is REAL. He teaches them, again, about what the Scriptures has said about the Messiah. Jesus then tells them that they are witnesses.

In legal terms, as witnesses, they are to tell the truth. The truth about Jesus Christ. The truth about Jesus includes living like Jesus.

Notice, there is no one excluded from the list of people whom God loves.

The call is to witness to “all nations.” “All nations.” These are the words Scripture uses to describe “all people.”

We have again in recent days seen images of police shootings of black people, school and workplace shootings and of people, angry and protesting over these violent actions.

Where is the church? Where are the Christians?

Much too often we are silent. Or just considered irrelevant.

Each of Jesus’ teachings and post-resurrection appearances call us to BE RELEVANT.

The church building is no longer the place that everyone goes on Sunday mornings. Christianity is no longer a concern for a majority of the people. Our collective focus has been more on getting into heaven than it has been to answer the call of Christ to be His witness.

Within the past couple of years, the PC(USA) has issued a call to its churches to be relevant again.

They have done this by encouraging churches to adopt a Matthew 25 mindsetⁱⁱⁱ. There are three areas of focus for this call to be a Matthew 25 church. These are:

- Building congregational vitality (engaging the community).
- Dismantling structural racism
- Eradicating systemic poverty.

Our Session wants us to pursue understanding what this Matthew 25 mindset is all about and how it can help transform First Presbyterian Church of Big Flats from a group of believers that meets on Sunday Morning to worship God, into a group of believers who also worships God by being relevant to the community around us.

Soon, I will be scheduling some study time for us to explore this Matthew 25 initiative and what it would look like for us to be intentional in engaging our community and to truly be a witness for Christ that is seen as relevant to our world.

We do many things that benefit our community. We house the Food Pantry and we have Shared Blessings; we will continue these efforts and look to expand and be creative in the ways in which we reach out to our neighbors. Let us seek opportunities to serve as Jesus served. Let us serve individually and together.

Our first opportunity to do this will be on 5th Sundays this year. Our Worship/Fellowship committee recommended to Session, who approved, that we use 5th Sundays as “Serve Sundays.” We will use these periodic Sundays to reach out in various ways. It may be compiling *Blessing Bags* or sack lunches for the Samaritan Center. It may be writing cards to our shut-ins. The first fifth Sunday is May 30th. Look for more information in the coming weeks.

Remember, just as Jesus came to his disciples following his resurrection, Jesus still comes to us, his disciples, today, and tells us not to be afraid. Jesus shows us that he is REAL and he teaches us through his words and his life so that WE can be witnesses.

So that we can again be relevant to the world around us.

So we can be relevant.

Please pray with me.

Miraculous God,
come to us now,
even as your Son came
to those first disciples
on the shores of Galilee.
You have spoken your peace to our hearts.
You have touched us with your Holy Spirit.
You have revealed your word to us this day.
May we hear and claim your message this day,
and live as your disciples
in the days and years to come.
In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.^{iv}

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.facebook.com/hobartcitychurch/photos/a.1551785531519133/3759005244130473/?type=3>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25/>.

^{iv} Adapted from *The Abingdon Worship Annual 2009*, © 2008 Abingdon Press. Posted on the [Worship Elements](#) page of the Ministry Matters website.