

Expert Witness
Luke 24:36b-48

Third Sunday of Easter/ 18th April 2021

The lectionary readings for the Sundays after Easter are stories of encounters with the Risen Christ. Whether it's on the road to Emmaus, at a table breaking bread, or appearing behind closed doors and extending "Peace," Jesus is on the move. And the disciples cannot deny what they have seen and heard and felt. They are called to bear witness to all of it.

Witness is a theme near and dear to Luke. It's how he understands the life of every would-be disciple, follower, and God-lover. He begins his Gospel this way: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided...to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus"—his name means, "God-lover"—"that you may know the truth..." (Luke 1:2-4).

Witness. *Martyr* in Greek. A martyr is someone who bears witness. It might cost you your life to do so, but it doesn't have to. "You are witnesses of these things," Jesus said to his disciples (Lk. 24:48). Luke continues this theme in the book of Acts. Jesus promises his disciples, "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria," ...in Baltimore, in Maryland... "and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Being a witness requires that we have witnessed something—not hearsay, but something we have seen with our own eyes, something we have encountered in the flesh, encountered, felt, touched. If we want others to trust our witness, we need to trust our experience and be faithful to it, honor, value, and cherish it. The Lord sends us witnesses because he assumes that we have experienced something—that you and me have experienced something of God's love and goodness and mercy and joy and new life and hope and justice and healing and wholeness—and he sends us to live *from* and live *toward* the fuller meaning of our experience as children of grace. And this means that experience must count for something.

This might sound obvious, but the Reformed theological tradition has always been uneasy with talk about valuing our experience. Theologically speaking, there is a tension between *revelation*, that is, the knowledge of God's grace and truth given to us directly by God, and what can be known about God through human *experience*. The Reformed tradition privileges revelation over experience. There are good theological reasons for this. It's certainly safer. Experience can be messy, complicated, chaotic. It might make us feel "out of order"—and we know how much Presbyterians *love* to feel out of order! Now, I know this is tricky, complicated ground. We tend to privilege objective over subjective truth. But I fear that if we move too far toward the objective, we lose touch with the personal. Every experience, every voice we hear is not of God—thank God. Several years ago, I received in the mail a seven-page, single-space letter from someone claiming to be, "The ONLY True Prophet of God," writing to tell me the "Truth about Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Homosexuals, and Dinosaurs." Still, there *are* people in and outside the church who are not sure they can trust their experience. There are folks in the

church who have had profound religious experiences, but never say a word about them to anyone. And there are people who want to share what they are learning about the Risen Christ and want to be faithful to it.

I'm sensitive around this issue. In my Middler (second) year at Princeton Seminary, I took a class on John Calvin. I wrote my final paper on the opening sentence of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."¹ One of my favorite quotes from the *Institutes*. Calvin says determining "which precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern."² Knowledge, meaning an existential apprehension of ourselves, leads to a knowledge of God and from the knowledge of God we turn to a true knowledge of ourselves. Well, I was in a state of existential shock when I opened the envelope containing the essay and saw the grade on the first page penciled in red: D-. I was not happy. I had pretty good grades in seminary, but everyone was struggling in this class. I had a C+ going into the final. And so, yes, this means I have a D+ on my transcript from Princeton Seminary in *Calvin*! I thought my life as a Presbyterian minister was over! What presbytery would ever ordain me? What doctoral program would ever admit me? The professor said I didn't place sufficient emphasis on revelation in the knowledge of God. Personal knowledge alone is incapable of knowing God.

It was humbling, to say the least. I can say that revelation now plays a significant role in my theology! But after nearly thirty years I'm still not convinced it's that simple. How we apprehend anything in this mysterious universe is far more complicated than Calvin ever could have imagined. I felt justified years later when I read Stacy Johnson, a theologian who teaches today at Princeton Seminary, say in his book on Calvin that "knowledge of God and knowledge of self are intimately linked."³ A true knowledge of ourselves means being clear about who we are and aren't, what we can and cannot know. But doesn't our experience count for something? Doesn't it? All that our hearts remember, all we know deep in our bodies, all our losses, our sufferings, our relationships, our gifts, our joys, all get caught up in the mix in how we know God and relate to God. Augustine (354-430) asserted, "To know myself is to know you," O God."⁴ Yes, theology isn't biography, but we can't discount the value of human experience. For what else do we have except our experience, limited as it is?

Sometimes experience of God is prior to dogmatic formulation. Experience grounds conviction. In one of her letters, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) wisely wrote, "Conviction without experience makes for harshness."⁵ We run the risk of becoming exceptionally harsh emphasizing conviction and ignoring, if not silencing the experience of many siblings who want to tell us something of Christ's love and what the Spirit is doing in their lives. I've found that far too many people fail to honor their experience and a lot of damage is done as a result. I have, regrettably, too many times discounted the value of my own. What if, instead, we're called to value our experience, to use what we've been given because what's been given to us is precious?

You are witnesses of these things. These things. What was Jesus referring to? What things?

All of it. Let's start with peace. The peace of God, the presence of God appearing in surprising places, in a closed room locked in fear. Resurrection. Death and Resurrection. Death

and Resurrection walking the road with us, meeting us where we are, coming into our lives and sitting at table with us and breaking bread with us and talking with us and teaching things we would have never been able to know or see or learn on our own. These things: Love. Mercy. Forgiveness. The possibility for repentance—a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of direction for our lives. These things. All this life-giving stuff! That’s what you and I are witnesses to.

You and I have been summoned, called to be faithful to what we know, faithful to what *you* know, what you have seen, what you have felt of God’s dying and undying love. And you don’t have any choice in the matter because once you have heard and seen and felt these things there’s no getting out of this responsibility; you and I, together, have an obligation to bear witness—to show and tell and embody these things. You—you, plural. Y’all. Y’all have work to do, work that must be done in and through the community. Yes, our experience together is important.

And in the life of the church, in this community, we also must use our personal, individual experiences. Bearing witness in this way allows others to see. You can use *your* experience of grace: all your pain, all your suffering and sadness, disappointments and sorrow, your passion, all the good that is within you, all your joy, all of it is holy and God can use all of it to bear witness to something more. Will you bear witness to what you know of God’s suffering, life-giving love for you?

And we bear witness to one another in community. Each of us has a blind spot. There are things we cannot see on our own. There are truths that we will not acknowledge by ourselves. You help me see what I cannot see. Hear things that I can’t tell myself or can’t hear when I say them to myself. There’s so much that’s not part of my experience but that I need to know about. I don’t know what it’s like being an Asian American or African American or transgendered Christian, but I need to understand and listen, I need to hear your witness, take it in, honor your perspective because it’s yours and it’s holy. And there are things that you can’t see, refuse, maybe afraid to hear, parts of my experience that I can bear witness to you in love.

James Baldwin (1924-1987) once said, “If I love you, I have to make you conscious of things you don’t want to see.” This isn’t easy. Yet, it seems to me that this is the difficult yet holy work of the church, this is bearing witness, listening to “the voices of peoples long silenced,”⁶ listening to people who are victims of injustice, taking their experiences seriously, hearing their cries. This is one of the reasons the church strives for healing and wholeness, why it names and denounces social injustice in society—the church lovingly helps us to see and discover what we cannot see on our own, in order to live toward and embody that “still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31). We have to say what we see, call it out: the racist thoughts and attitudes that we harbor within that we refuse to confess or see and therefore do great harm. The poisonous roots of violence and abusive power in our society and in our churches. Where does this come from? Christians who claim the name of Christ but really bear witness to all that is anti-Christ. Yes, the list is long. The greater or deeper point, however, is that as Christ’s disciples we can be witnesses of something more, a different narrative, witnesses of a different story that is redemptive and holy, offering a different way, the way of resurrection, of hope. In a world

where the gospel, God’s good news, is daily on trial, Christ turns to us, both individually and together, to be expert witnesses of “these things.”

This is our calling. This is your calling. It’s why you are here. To bear witness to something greater than yourself—“these things” as Jesus said. For such a time as this—your time. Your life, fleeting and short as it is before the age of the universe, all of it, can bear witness to all this grace. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1924) asked an enormous question regarding his life. In a collection of poems known as his *Duino Elegies*, which he started to write in 1912 in Castle Duino, situated along the coast near Trieste, Italy, Rilke asked, “Why?” Why in this interlude of grace which we call our lives are we human? He came to a stunning conclusion. We are here because “this fleeting world” apparently needs us. Or we could say, theologically, why are we here? Because God needs us, we who are “the most fleeting of all.” Each of us is here to observe, to bear witness to all things, only once, and no more. This moment, this time, this is our task. We are being summoned. Rilke exclaims, “Here is the speakable moment; here is its home. Speak and bear witness.”⁷ This is our task, formidable and simple: to bear witness. Bear witness to what?

Oh, you know.

“These things” as Jesus said.

Deep in your heart, you know.



Jean-Marie Pirot (1926-2018), *Les Pèlerins d'Emmaus* (The Pilgrims of Emmaus),
Saint-Hugues-de-Chartreuse, Grenoble, France.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), ed. John T. McNeill; trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I.1.1.

² Calvin, I.1.1. On this seeming ambiguity in the relation between divine knowledge and self-knowledge, see Serene Jones, "An Apology for Divine Wisdom," in *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 87-120.

³ William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin: Reformer for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 51.

⁴ *Viderim me, viderim te*, quoted by St. Teresa of Ávila [1515-1582], *The Interior Castle, The Complete Works of St. Teresa*, vol.2, trans. and ed. E. Ellison Peers (London: Sheed & Ward, 1957).

⁵ Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, Selected and Edited by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1995), 97.

⁶ "In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage . . . to hear the voices of peoples long silenced." From A Brief Statement of Faith, *Book of Confessions*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

⁷ I rely here on James Hollis' interpretation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* in *The Archetypal Imagination* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2000), 46-50.