

## **The Resurrection Way of Witness**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Acts 1:1-11  
on May 21, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

We have in my house a new hot item, the most fought-over item in the house. Now you may think perhaps it's a toy, a video game, maybe a book, or maybe even our new puppy! No - that item of highest interest to our three kids is their school yearbook. It just came out at Arts Based School, and as we only bought one copy for our house, it's become the item everyone wants to look at! That little yearbook, full of pictures and names and faces and stories and words, offers a snapshot of the year that has been, telling all about the art classes and productions and dance classes and math and reading, all the life contained within this year. As we move throughout the month of May, we're in a season of reflecting back at all the life contained within, looking back and considering what has been. Yearbooks do that for us. Graduations do too. (Shout out to the new graduates in the room!)

### II.

In the rhythms of our church, we're also nearing the end of our school year-long theme called "On the Way." I confess I'm feeling a bit nostalgic as I remember this year! We've traveled quite the journey, haven't we, full of pictures and names and faces and stories and words and snapshots of what this year has been.

So it's only appropriate that Ascension Day arrives for us in May too, this final Sunday of Eastertide, the day we join the disciples in looking up to heaven as Jesus departs from this world. Throughout these weeks, we've been reminded of Jesus' resurrection ministry: how he has been made known as the crucified and resurrected Christ in the breaking of the bread, the

opening of the scriptures, the journeying on the road, the sharing of peace in the midst of fear. As the disciples moved past the initial shock of his appearance among them, perhaps they were basking in his presence again, their stability returning, their inner compass and sense of grounding back in their midst. Perhaps they imagined what ministry with their Lord would be like on this side of the cross and tomb, what good news they'd tell the world together about the God who never lets death have the final word. Perhaps their minds filled with the possibilities of how many lives could be changed, how much good could be done, how expansive their reach could be, with all the pictures and names and faces and stories and words and snapshots of what could be. "We're back together again!" I imagine the disciples to exclaim. "The gang's all here!"

Luke tells us that Jesus was in the midst of blessing when, to the disciples' surprise, he departed from Bethany. That blessing was like an unfinished thought, blessing that began at his baptism and ended his earthly life here. It's almost like that was the final word he wanted to leave behind, almost like we're to pick up right where he left off.

Acts, the other part of this story, pivots right to the power that Jesus says the disciples will receive when the Holy Spirit comes, like a dove that will soon descend. And as he was taken up from them, two came down – angels perhaps. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" It's almost like they were being shaken out of their reverie, almost like they needed to return to the ground, to their agency in this work, to the gift and task that unfurled before them without Jesus by their side.

These particularities of each account connect us to the larger story from whence they came, but in both accounts, Jesus tells the disciples of their

witness. “You are witnesses of these things!,” Jesus tells them in Luke. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” Jesus says in Acts. *You’ve experienced it! You’ve seen it! You are witnesses! Now go and tell that good news.*

### III.

This word ‘witness’ is a curious one, isn’t it? It may come with some baggage for you too! In evangelical circles like the ones I ran with in high school, *testimony* or *witness* can refer to the autobiographical accounts that individuals offer about how they became a Christian, how God in Christ became real to us in new ways. The word “witness” can also recall images of the courtroom rather than ones of the cross. In a court of law where one is ‘on trial,’ summoning witnesses to offer testimony is the primary method used to determine judgment and discern the truth, the words, in some cases, upon which everything hangs. So what might it mean to be the witnesses? And where do we do that exactly?

I love how Jesus gets specific in Acts: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This says to us that place matters to God, that there is no corner of our living where God and God’s people will not or should not go, that the work of discipleship exists in time and space, with particular people, in particular ways and locations. Scholar Willie Jennings reminds us that these disciples will “make their lives a stage on which the resurrected Jesus will appear and claim each creature as his own, as a site of love and desire.”<sup>1</sup>

Just this week, I learned of an article written several years ago by Jia Tolentino called “The I in Internet,” a searing critique of our

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<sup>1</sup> Willie Jennings, *Belief: Acts*, p19.

increasingly-online lives. “As a medium,” she wrote, “the internet is defined by a built-in performance incentive. In real life, you can walk around living life and be visible to other people. But you can’t just walk around and be visible on the internet – for anyone to see you, you have to *act*.”<sup>2</sup> She goes on to describe how deeply and thoroughly our lives on the internet have become performative, and how – unlike the theater – on the internet, there is no backstage, no place to recalibrate and rest and stop performing. With today’s sermon on my mind, I couldn’t help but to hear this description of the internet as location for the always-performing, even as the location for our witness. I’m not sure Jesus had the internet on his mind when he calls us “to the ends of the earth,” but so be it!

Yet beyond form or location, there is an ordinariness to witness, a dailiness, a moment-by-moment living into it. Witness doesn’t just happen in the grand proclamation or the expert testimony. Rather, our witness unfolds in our living. In our actions. In our words. In our relationships. In our daily practice. Tom Long says, “we are not on the witness stand [as Christians] to grow the church, to make ourselves look religious, or figure out legal strategy that ensures our side ‘wins.’ We are witnesses, and we are there for one and only one purpose: to tell the truth about what we’ve seen and heard.”<sup>3</sup>

#### IV.

How do we learn to tell this truth? How do we learn to be the witnesses Jesus tells us we are? Just like a plumber learns to work on pipes, or the horseback rider learns to gallop, or the philosopher learns to ponder, we have to immerse ourselves with other witnesses, planting and rooting our life in Christian community – not isolating away from it all, or performing online in

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<sup>2</sup> Jia Tolentino, “The I in Internet,” <https://lab.cccb.org/en/the-i-in-the-internet/>

<sup>3</sup> Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p29.

spite of it all, or feeding our culture's cynicism because of it all. Rather, we locate ourselves with other Christians to pattern the rhythms and pictures and names and faces and stories and words and snapshots of our lives around the good news we proclaim. We have to be with other Christians, so that we can learn how to do it on our own. Together, we practice those rhythms. We stay. Grieve. Pray. Wait. Tend. Watch expectantly. Ready ourselves. Receive. Welcome. Celebrate. Break bread. Immerse ourselves in water. Show up for each other. Be astonished by power not of our own creation or cultivation. And respond. Pray. Read. Study. Worship. Give thanks.

And then we tell about it! We proclaim to the world about a Love that looks like a father welcoming his ragged child home. We tell about a wedding banquet where all have a seat. We tell of the Love that sounds like stones dropped in shame or nets left on a shore. We preach about baptisms of grace and mercy you experience over and over again. We feast at the table where all are welcome. We declare that hope unfolds 'while it was still dark,' that grace saves 'while we were still sinners,' that goodness emerges from chaos 'while a wind from God swept over the face of the deep'. We announce the Comforter who has born our heavy burdens, the Good Shepherd who has chased after us when we have gone astray, the Storm-Calmer and Demon-Releaser, Table-Turner and Wounded Healer, Story-Teller and Miracle-Worker, the Prophet who proclaimed good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and jubilee to all who are bound by the things of this world. That is how we are witnesses!

V.

In the years leading up to World War II, Viktor Klemperer was a professor of literature at the University of Dresden – an absolute dream job of his. All his life, he'd hoped to write the world's best book on 18th century French literature. He could see it now: respect in the faculty lounge, autographs at conferences the world over, accolades and clear deference to his knowledge and expertise. Anybody who wanted to talk about 18th century French literature would have to talk about Viktor Klemperer.

But then the Nazis came to power, and began chipping away at Viktor's life. They took his telephone, then his car. They canceled one of his classes at the university, and then all of them. His typewriter, his house, his cat – gone, taken, robbed from him and millions of other Jews, one right after another. With each indignity, Viktor wrote it down – all of it. He described his deprivations and disrespect, what suffering did to his people – some whose compassion grew, others who tightened and withered in their anger. In May of 1942, the Gestapo conducted a terrifying house search, which, as usual, included vandalism and beatings of all, even the elderly. Viktor wrote again in his diary that if it would be discovered, he'd surely be killed. "But I shall go on writing," he declared, "I will bear witness, precise witness." Viktor's scope had narrowed, and no longer could he write the sweeping narrative he longed to write, not even a big history of Nazi cruelty. He could only tell his diary, day after day, about the ordinary ways Nazis stripped people of their dignity, right to its last, tattered bits.

In his telling of Victor's story, Cornelius Plantinga ends with this: "Viktor Klemperer had hoped to write the world's best account of 18th century French literature. But the Nazis took his life away. Except that, at the end of the day, they didn't. They couldn't. The reason is that Viktor Klemperer

and his diary survived, and are now celebrated all over the world. Viktor Klemperer's diary is his distinction. It's what he's known for. Klemperer had thought that his glory would be a book about French literature, but the Lord meant his daily diary to be his glory. Klemperer couldn't stop the Nazis from robbing him, but there was one thing he could do. He could 'bear witness, precise witness,' and he could bear it to the end. He was a witness to the truth, and he didn't know that this would be his glory."<sup>4</sup>

## VI.

One writer has said, "the church is a community that bears witness, and in so doing, not only 'follows' Jesus in the sense of listening to him and learning from him; we also are a community who "follows" Jesus in the sense of succeeding him, of taking up his mantle and carrying on his life and work, all so that his joy and our joy might be complete, not just here and there, but 'to the ends of the earth.'"<sup>5</sup> Another wryly admonishes the church against wistfully longing for our departed leader, he says, "as if the church were a mere memorial society for a dead Jesus."<sup>6</sup> No, as the body of Christ (the Galilean) recedes into a cloud, the Body of Christ (the church, us!) prepares to be born next week, at Pentecost. Because there is work to be done! There is good news to be shared! There is a mantle we must carry! *There is witness, precise witness to bear!*

So friends, when you wonder how and when the resurrection way of witness should look and feel and sound like, know this:

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<sup>4</sup> As told by Cornelius Plantinga, *Reading for Preaching*, p96-98.

<sup>5</sup> SALT Project,

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/5/28/for-the-love-of-the-world-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-7-and-ascension-sunday>

<sup>6</sup> Will Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, p21.

You are witnesses to the journey to Jerusalem, the Hosannas that hung in the air until cries of crucifixion drowned them out on the way to Calvary.

You are witnesses to the truth that we killed him with our pride and our righteousness, our fear and our mad desire for control.

You are witnesses to the wild impossibility of resurrection, when God “keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity, resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves, ... and loving us back to life over and over.”<sup>7</sup>

You are witnesses to the Way, to Word made flesh, to God-with-us, to such boundless love for all creation that to him, we are called beloved.

You are witnesses, Jesus says, and even as I depart from this place, I leave behind the greatest story ever told, the truth that sets all creation free.

You are witnesses, friends!

Today is a new day! Let's get to work.

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<sup>7</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*.