

You Are Witnesses

*A sermon preached on Luke 24:44-53 on Sunday, May 17, 2026,
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I.

Something tells me that despite all our many differences, I bet every one of us here was captivated by the story of Artemis II and the crew that flew it farther past the earth by the moon than anyone else before them. Awe came upon Reid and Victor and Christina and Jeremy, as they contemplated the heavens, and named new craters in the moon's landscape, and saw earth by way of the far side. But perhaps best of all for the rest of us was that they told us about it! They took pictures and shared stories, showed videos and introduced us to "Rise," their stuffed companion. Throughout their mission, countless of us received the gift of their "moon joy." We felt it too! It was real and human, this experience they shared with us. Of this mission, NASA Associate Administrator Amit Kshatriya said this: "If you can't take love to the stars, then what are we doing? [...] That's why we send humans instead of robots sometimes, that's why we have that firsthand witness."¹

During their journey, were you like me and gazed up at the heavens differently while they were gone? Did you look more closely at the moon to see if you could spot Artemis going around it? Did you look more widely at the expanse of the skies simply to marvel? It was a different kind of ascension when Artemis launched into the universe, yet one that has taught us a thing or two about witness.

II.

¹ Dunn, Marcia (April 9, 2026). ["Artemis II astronauts describe their lunar voyage as surreal and profound ahead of Earth return"](#). *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved April 13, 2026.

Ascension Day is the final Sunday of the season of Eastertide, the day we join the disciples in looking up to heaven as Jesus departs from the 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 once 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 right on the horizon of their imagination. "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 blessing 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 in Luke and Acts 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. It’s hard to preach on witness and not immediately think of evangelical circles like the ones I ran with in high school, where *testimony* or *witness* can refer to the autobiographical accounts that individuals offer about when we first met Jesus. Outside of our Christian context, the word “witness” can mean to see or hear something – an eyewitness or earwitness account – that indicates firsthand knowledge of a happening. 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, sometimes offering descriptions of someone’s character. These are the words, in some cases, upon which everything hangs. So what might it mean to be a witness?

I love how Jesus gets specific in Acts: “you will be my witnesses,” – *where?* – “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."²

Yet beyond form or location of witness, 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, 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."³

So to witness, then, demands our seeing and our speaking and our truth-telling most of all. To see God's dream for this world being made real and to share that good news in a world fraught and despairing. To see it, to notice it, to pay attention where love pierces the veil and breaks in despite all the odds. And then, to share it! Not necessarily in the courtroom, but necessarily of the truth. Not only with our voices, but with our hands and feet, our priorities and our very lives. Even when your voice whistles in the spare winds alone. Even when the truth costs you. Even when you think the seeing and the speaking are better handled by someone else. In just a few minutes, we'll recognize our graduates, freshly emerging from a season of

² Willie Jennings, *Belief: Acts*, p19.

³ Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p29.

curiosity and learning. These graduates might think, “someone else knows more about being the witness than me! Someone else knows more material than me! Someone else might be better equipped than me!” Even if you think someone else knows more than you, “you are my witnesses,” Jesus says, “so speak truth, speak with courage and conviction, speak when all the powers and principalities of this world would have you stay silent in the face of their laughter, or jeers, or indifference, or cynicism. You are my witnesses, all of you, no matter who you are!”

IV.

The late James Billington was best known as the former librarian of Congress, appointed by President Reagan back in 1987. His was a 23-year tenure of expanded access, owing to his almost obsessive desire to get more information into the hands of the public and his commitment to digitizing thousands of the library’s volumes so that they could be enjoyed by the millions who’d never make the trip to Washington. But he was chosen by the president, in part because of his work as an academic and scholar of Russian history.

Billington was known to tell a story about the time he traveled to Moscow in August of 1991. There for an international library conference, he was a witness to history when the coup broke out that would ultimately fracture the Soviet Union. Those were dangerous days, when the power balance between Russian president Boris Yeltsin and his defenders faced angry hardliners out for consolidating power for the Communist party of the Soviet Union. Tanks and troops filled Moscow that month. Any fear Billington had for his life withered beneath his relentless curiosity for anything that would tell the story of these three days that changed the world, so he sent his

staff out into the streets to find every flyer, bulletin, leaflet, and manifesto that could be collected, taken back to Washington, and used to tell the story.⁴

One such story that emerged and that Billington would later retell again and again was that of the babushkas, the “old women in the church” whose courageous public witness offered successful resistance that changed the course of history. The babushkas were commonly the butt of jokes, as people around the world saw these kerchiefed old ladies of the Orthodox Church as irrelevant, pathetic, and evidence of religion’s decline and inevitable death.

But on August 20, 1991, when martial law was declared and citizens sent directly to their homes, it was the babushkas who disobeyed. Some went straight to the place of confrontation, while others went to feed the resisters in public support. Some staffed medical stations. Some prayed publicly and loudly for a miracle. And perhaps the most courageous among them climbed up into the tanks, peered through the slits at the men inside, and told them that God had sent new orders: “thou shalt not kill.” Wouldn’t you know it, the men stopped the tanks. Reflecting on that night, James Billington said, “the attack never came, and by dawn of the third day, we realized the tide had turned.”⁵ Being a witness isn’t just in what you see, but what that seeing leads you to do.

V.

We may not all be babushkas crawling into tanks to stop a disaster, but as the witnesses to Jesus Christ in this world, the church has a role! Not just

⁴ Bill Thomas, “King of the Stacks: Librarian of Congress James Billington Targets a World of Information: Get It In, Move It Out,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 1992, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-11-15-tm-668-story.html>

⁵ Story as told by Thomas Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p139.

the big-C church, but our congregation! You, me, us together! 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.’”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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 to bear.*

Dear church, know that you are witnesses, Jesus says. You are witnesses to the journey to Jerusalem, the Hosannas and anguish that journeyed alongside Love to the cross. You are witnesses to the wild impossibility of resurrection, when God makes all things new once again. You are witnesses to the Way, to Word made flesh, to God-with-us, to such boundless love for all creation that to God, we are all called beloved. You are witnesses to another Way of Life, God’s dream for this world where mountains are made low and hills are lifted up, where crooked places are made straight and rough places are made plain. You are witnesses to an upside-down kingdom that sounds like handfuls of yeast, and seeds flung lavishly on the ground, and pearls of greatest price, but is conveying love

⁶ 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>

⁷ Will Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, p21.

above all else. You are witnesses right here in Winston-Salem, right in our schools and our parks, our offices and our care facilities, right in our relationships, especially ones fraught with difference, right in our politics desperate for justice, right in the places where despair seems to be the loudest voice of all.

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

VI.

As the story goes, the Master's disciples had endless questions about God. To their questions, the Master demurred. "God is the Unknowable," he says. "Anything we say about God, every statement we make is just words. A distortion of the Truth." One disciple was bewildered, "then why do you speak of God at all?" "Why does the bird sing?," the Master replied. "She sings not because she has a statement but because she has a song."⁸

Amen!

⁸ <https://www.wisdom2be.com/gems-poetry-wisdomstories/the-song-of-the-bird-anthony-de-mello> and Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions*.