

Living Into Resurrection: We Are Witnesses  
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We know all about being witnesses. We are told that we are witnesses, we are embraced as witnesses, and we rejoice at being witnesses on a regular basis.

No, not in church. In a basketball arena.

It happens at the cathedral of the holy hoops, otherwise known as Quicken Loans Arena. In that location, the high priest of basketball for the area - LeBron James - will begin the festivities by putting a whole lot of powder on his hands, the stuff players use to keep their hands dry. He will then throw it into the air and keep his arms outstretched, as a way of saying, "You are in this with us. You are witnesses."

And he does it as many thousands of people cheer wildly. Winning 41 out of 43 games at home and having the best record in the NBA will do that for you.

All of these sports actions have an almost religious take to them – the ritual act on a regular basis, the appeal to the congregation, the call to be witnesses. And most church people, at least the ones I know, don't mind one bit. They are cheering just as loudly as anyone. Hey, after all, what's wrong with a little free publicity?

Nothing, except that the readings we heard this morning have nothing to do with beating the daylight out of Pistons and Celtics. Not that there wasn't any opposition. Far from it. The adversaries were very real and very fierce. But that made the call to be witnesses, and the follow through on that call, all the more important.

But what are they to be witnesses about? What is the event to which they give witness? Those are important questions for us this morning – not as we enter the basketball playoffs, but as we ordain and install new church officers. When we do this the temptation exists to treat the church as just another kind of business: Pay lip service to the spiritual side and then get on with the business at hand as our leaders perform their functions as a board of directors. A big part of that work is the function of any board, which is to maintain the status quo, perpetuate institutional survival, and keep the church out of trouble.

I'm really hoping – and expecting – that they know better. They know that the call to be an officer of the church is more than maintaining the status quo. It is being witnesses to something more than a building, more exciting than institutional survival. It's even a witness to something greater than yourself. It is being witnesses to the same thing that the early disciples were called to be witnesses to.

In both of these texts, we heard that call. At the end of Luke's gospel account, the resurrected Christ appears to his disciples. He tries to calm them down, assuring them that he is really there. Finally, to confirm that the miracle of resurrection is true, Jesus does the ultimate act of proof – he eats something. Then he tells them that they will be witnesses of these things.

Later on, in Luke II, otherwise known as the Book of Acts, Peter and John have healed a lame man by the gate going into the Temple. The people know who this guy is, they have seen him dragging himself around that gate for years, and now they see him up and dancing around like an ancient Baryshnikov, and they want to know what is going on. The disciples proceed to retell the story of the resurrection, including the people's part in the whole thing – that of giving up Jesus, the author of life, to

be crucified, even though Pilate wanted to release him. They have all been implicated, all included in the act of killing the Son of God. But God has overcome this, Peter said, and we are witnesses of these things.

We still haven't answered the question. We know what LeBron and his teammates want us to witness to: A championship basketball team. But Jesus wants us to witness to something different. And what is that something different? The first part is obvious: We are to be witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. That's why Jesus tells them to touch his wounds, to touch their doubts; that's why he eats the fish. These are all signs that what they are witnessing is not an apparition. They are witnessing God's new reality, life overcoming death. As they do that, they are living into resurrection.

When they do that, their witness is more than talking about something. There is a doing involved here as well. And that doing consists in both of these stories of two actions which are very much a part of the Christian life: Repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance – that is, turning around, 'changing directions'; going one way, realizing that this is not the right way to go, and heading toward somewhere, or someone, else. Repentance is not beating yourself up for something. It's also not beating up someone else because their standards don't match yours, or they haven't lived up to your expectations. Repentance is giving yourself freedom to know that you don't always have to keep going in this direction, you don't always have to do what you've always done. It is giving that same wonderful freedom to others. Benjamin Franklin once defined insanity as doing the same things over and over and expecting a different result. Repentance is God's gift of change; we can change the direction we are going. But we don't do it just to do something different. We do it because we want to go in the direction God has for us. We do it because we have witnessed the new life Christ has for us, and we want to be witnesses of that new life.

Not only are we witnesses of repentance, of the opportunity to change directions. We are also witnesses of the forgiveness of sins. Like repentance, this can be used as weapon. We can be so sure that other people would be so much better off if they would live their lives like us. But forgiveness is not a weapon to use on someone whose standards are different from ours. Forgiveness is a means of grace by which we can let go of the past that threatens to enslave us. Forgiveness is the way God frees us, and we are witnesses that God has given it to us to free others.

What repentance and forgiveness point to is something that only God can do. Only God can raise the dead, only God can open our eyes to see where the right direction is, only God can empower us to forgive. We are witnesses to that which only God can do, but that is our call. That is God's gift to those of us who preach, to those who come forward to be ordained and installed, and to all of us who follow the way of Jesus. It is living into resurrection by admitting that we don't always get it right. But that God can take our poor, fumbling, sometimes sinful efforts and transform them into something glorious.

That has something powerful to say on a day in which we ordain and install new officers. We live in a new day, a tough day for church leaders, and yet a day much more like that of Peter and John than that of our ancestors. Like them, the church is not the place to be, not the big source of influence. People didn't pay much attention to the church back then until they saw lives being mended and broken people made whole. That is true today. It is a time to witness, to make the new life of Jesus Christ incarnate in our world, in our communities, in our churches. We are witnesses of that love when we

recognize that we need to change direction and go in God's way, and we also witness to it when we learn to forgive ourselves and others so that we may move into the direction God has for us.

Cynthia Gano Lindner, who teaches pastoral care at the University of Chicago Divinity School, wrote about the Lukan text but she could have been writing about our call to be witnesses, when she wrote about living into resurrection:

"We make pilgrimage to the tomb of some long-dead dream or desire, only to be surprised by the contractions of resurrection: hope still stirs. We glance up from our daily commute and our eyes meet the eyes of a stranger who nods in a moment of holy recognition: the birth pangs of resurrection, once again. We clasp the weathered hand of an aging loved one or playfully count the toes of a toddler; our hearts break and our hands open when we hear that oh-so-human and oh-so-divine request, 'Do you have anything to eat?' We break bread around cafeteria tables, soup kitchen tables, dining room tables, communion tables – and our minds are opened to understand ourselves and our place in the world yet again. We are, all of us, children and heirs of the resurrection – which is God's affirmation that creation matters, that love and justice matter, that humanity, despite all of its ambiguity and complexity, is still fearfully and wonderfully God-made. We are evidence of Christ's continuing in-breaking, of the resurrection which was and is and is to come."

To live in the light of the resurrection is to be embraced by – and to embrace – our call to be witnesses: To witness to Christ's resurrection, and the opportunities for repentance and forgiveness it brings. It won't guarantee a championship, but it will make us all feel like winners. Amen.

Texts are Luke 24:36-48 and Acts 3:11-20  
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