June 1, 2014

Luke 24:44-53 (The Message)

You’re the witnesses

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 24:44-53 The Message

Then Jesus said, “Everything I told you while I was with you comes to this: All the things written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms have to be fulfilled.” He went on to open their understanding of the Word of God, showing them how to read their Bibles this way. He said, “You can see now how it is written that the Messiah suffers, rises from the dead on the third day, and then a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations—starting from here, from Jerusalem! You’re the first to hear and see it. You’re the witnesses. What comes next is very important: I am sending what my Father promised to you, so stay here in the city until he arrives, until you’re equipped with power from on high.” He then led them out of the city over to Bethany. Raising his hands he blessed them, and while blessing them, took his leave, being carried up to heaven. And they were on their knees, worshiping him. They returned to Jerusalem bursting with joy. They spent all their time in the Temple praising God. Yes.

Did you know that Easter is not just one day? We in the Church celebrate Easter for 50 days. And at the end of those 50 days, which will be next Sunday, June the 8th, we celebrate Pentecost, which is when the Church officially began with the gift of the Holy Spirit. After Jesus’ resurrection on Easter, Jesus helped his disciples understand what had happened on Good Friday and Easter. Jesus visited with his disciples and taught them, encouraged them, and commissioned them. Forty days after Easter, 10 days before Pentecost, Jesus’ disciples are asking Jesus what is next. When will his kingdom be established? Jesus says to wait because the Holy Spirit is coming and we are to be witnesses. We are to be witnesses! And then Jesus’ ascension happens; Jesus is lifted up to heaven and returns to God. A cloud takes Jesus out of sight and the baton has been passed to Jesus’ disciples. They are to continue his work, to be Jesus’ witnesses assisted by the Holy Spirit. The disciples return to Jerusalem bursting with joy and spend their time praising God.

I love that while the disciples waited for the Holy Spirit, they prayed in the Temple and praised God continuously. No one likes to wait. But when we wait, we like the disciples are able to be changed, to be refreshed and renewed. While we wait we can pray and praise God continuously. Maya Angelou said, "I know that when I pray, something wonderful happens. Not just to the person or persons for whom I'm praying, but also something wonderful happens to me. I'm grateful that I'm heard."

I believe that prayer prepares us to be open to the power that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enabled and guided the ministry of the disciples and the Holy Spirit enables and guides our own ministry as witnesses of Christ’s presence and power. Ascension Sunday reminds me that if Christ’s work is to continue, it is up to us, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to do it. Jesus is no longer here to heal the sick. He is no longer here to touch the outcast. He is no longer here to feed the hungry. It is up to us, the body of Christ, to continue this work. If the church fails to be the body of Christ, Jesus is absent. If the church fails to be the body of Christ, Jesus is nowhere to be seen.

 In the Book of Acts it says that as Jesus was lifted up into the clouds, the disciples were gazing up toward heaven and suddenly two men in white robes were standing by them. The two men asked, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” There is work to be done, why aren’t you doing it? We do that in the church, we stand around looking up toward heaven because Jesus can’t mean that we are the ones who are supposed to visit those in jail. Jesus can’t mean that we are the ones who are supposed to proclaim that following Jesus has made a difference in our lives. Is it really supposed to be us who lift up the marginalized of our society? Is it really supposed to be us who speak against oppression? Us who proclaim the gospel of God’s favor for the poor?

We are witnesses to Christ, we point to him. This past week I was really disappointed in a friend. I expected her to be somewhere and she was a no show. Three times I would write a text to her, and then delete it. I was just so angry. And in the span of about thirty minutes my angry became sadness. I realized that I was just so disappointed because I expected her to be there and she did not come. I asked my husband Lee if I should say something to her because I wanted her to know how hurt I was. Lee gave me a hug and said, “Who is forgiveness for?” “Me,” I responded. And who do you hurt by not forgiving her?” “Me,” I responded. Lee was a witness to Christ for me in that moment. He helped point me to Christ and what Christ would want me to do.

We witness when we make a phone call when a friend loses a loved one. When we have a cup of coffee with a neighbor who is going through a difficult time. When we visit a relative who is in a nursing home or hospital. And during those visits when we express our concern, offer our prayers, and share the hope that we have found in God. We are witnesses to Christ, we point to him.

 I remember talking with my mom after a couple had come to me for counseling. They were so angry with each other and I did not feel likes our time together had made any difference. My mom shared with me a story that has stuck with me. She said that in a relationship any time the other person does something to make you angry, or disappoints you, or is inconsiderate or insensitive, we put dirt on them. Eventually if the relationship goes on for enough time, that person will be covered in dirt. We have to decide if we are willing to get out our chisel and chisel away that hardened dirt. Will we forgive them for all of the times we have been wronged? Will we forgive them and remove that dirt, so that we can see them as they are, as human who makes mistakes? Are we willing to forgive them and remove that dirt, not only for them but for us? Who is forgiveness for? Us. Who is hurt by not forgiving? We are. My mom was a witness to Christ with that story, she helped point me to Christ and what Christ would want me to do.

We are witnesses to Christ, we point to him. We are to be Christ’s witnesses and carry on Christ’s work at home, at our school, at our work, in Dallas and to all the world. Jesus kept an eye out for people who needed healing, touching lepers, putting healing clay on blind eyes, telling the lame to stand up and walk, going looking for the woman who touched his robe believing that he could heal her. Jesus made friends with people whom everyone else avoided. Jesus invited himself to dinner with Zaccheus, the tax-collecting cheat. Jesus included rough fishermen and political troublemakers among his disciples. Jesus taught us to forgive and love even our enemies. Jesus showed us how to forgive as Jesus forgave the people who betrayed, denied, and killed him.

And when Jesus ascends to heaven and the disciples are gazing up toward heaven may we remember the two men in white robes who ask, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” May we not look high like the disciples but instead look to this earth to see what work we have to do. May we remember what Jesus said and did. May we be convinced of Jesus’ continued presence with us and know that Jesus is not through with us. The adventure with Jesus is just beginning.

As believers in Christ, as people baptized by water and by the Holy Spirit, we have the power given to us by God to make a difference. We can bring people to the knowledge and love of God through what we say and do and through the story we share in love. The well-known radio broadcaster Paul Harvey once said, "Too many Christians are no longer fishers of men but keepers of the aquarium." There are so many who are searching to hear about the hope and healing that we have found in Christ. Jesus wants us to get out of our comfort zones and spend time among those who are not in our circle, not in our church already, maybe it is the person you see at work who is struggling, or the neighbor who does not have a church home. There are so many people in this very neighborhood who are desperate to discover the source of wholeness, the fountain of living water that wells up to abundant life.

We are believers in Christ, baptized by water and by the Holy Spirit, and we have the power given to us by God to make a difference. We have the power to bring people to the knowledge and love of God through what we say and do. There was an artist who wanted to depict that idea on canvas. She painted a storm at sea, black clouds filled the sky and there was a flash of lightning. A little boat could be seen getting pounded by the ocean. People were struggling in the water, their anguished faces seemed to be crying out for help. In the foreground of the painting there was a large rock protruding out of the water. A seaman clutched desperately with both hands onto that rock. As the artist reflected upon her work, she realized that the painting was missing something. So the artist made one change. The lone seaman was holding onto the rock with one hand, and with the other hand he was reaching down to pull up a drowning friend. Until that hand is extended, there is no Gospel and there is no hope for the world. May we go as witnesses to the faith, may we tell our story so that others might believe. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so, Amen.