THERE’S SOMETHING HERE THAT SOUNDS FAMILIAR
Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton
April 22, 2012
Scripture: Psalm 4, Luke 24:36-51

There’s something about the text today that seems familiar. I know one of the reasons. This is, after all the third week in Eastertide, so it’s the third time we’ve heard the good news of Jesus’ resurrection proclaimed to a surprised and wondering group of disciples. That’s familiar, of course.

And if it sounds a little like the story that just precedes it in Luke’s gospel, that may not be surprising either. After all, same editor. You remember... the story of the Emmaus Road where two travelers are on their way out of Jerusalem on Easter night. Travelers who are joined by a mysterious companion who seems uninformed about the events that have so dismayed these two disciples, Cleopas and another, perhaps Cleopas’ wife, or perhaps it was just another one of us.

Cleopas explains to the Risen Lord, their fellow traveler, the source of their dismay... their earlier hopes, their dashed expectations, Jesus’ arrest and trial, even his crucifixion, and the troubling reports of the women who bore a tale of resurrection that morning.

Along the way the Risen Lord opened the scriptures to them and explained their meaning. And still they didn’t understand who it was that was with them.

Finally at nightfall, when they reached the town where they were going, Cleopas and his fellow companion invited this stranger to break bread with them and stay a little longer. And when the guest broke the bread and handed it to them, their eyes were opened and they saw him for whom he was.

The story today is something like that, with elements of mistaken identity, fear and confusion, the reference to food, and the element of Jesus teaching the scriptures after which the disciples’ minds are opened and they recognize him for who he is.

But there is something else that’s familiar here, as well, and it’s found in the way that Luke tells the story, an echo of an earlier account, a story that takes us back to the beginning when an angel named Gabriel came to Mary with good news, a heavenly being whose words bore the comforting reassurance “Do not be afraid, the Lord is with you.”

Of course, the disciples were afraid. “Startled and terrified,” is the way the NRSV puts it, as if they were seeing a ghost. The Greek uses the same word in both stories, to indicate the doubt and fear and questioning that Mary experienced and the same fear and questioning that shook the disciples.

But perhaps most startling of all is the fact that the risen Lord charges the disciples to be his witnesses, “You will be my witnesses,” he says as they stand there shaking in their sandals trying to understand what is happening, what will be their next move, not feeling very much like witnesses at all in that moment. Sort of like Mary must have shuddered when the angel charged her to be a witness to all that she had seen and heard giving flesh and blood, quite literally, to God’s promise.

“You will be my witnesses,” Jesus said to his disciples, and so they would be, witnesses to the ends of the earth beginning in Jerusalem.

If the annunciation is Luke’s way of kicking off the miraculous thing that God would do through Mary in the birth of Jesus, then this appearance story at the end of Luke’s gospel is another kind of annunciation, the start of a new thing that God would do through the disciples as they waited for power from on high.

It would be a short while and they would indeed be empowered by the Holy Spirit to go forth from Jerusalem into the world bearing the good news of God’s love embedded in the gospel and inspired by the resurrection.

“You are my witnesses,” he said to those startled and wondering disciples. And what an unlikely proposition.

If Mary was an unexpected choice to be Jesus’ mother; a poor girl, an anawim, young and not
yet married, from the little backwater town of Nazareth, how much more unlikely was the choice of the ones that Jesus had chosen.

Impetuous Peter, bullish on braggadocio, never getting it quite right, ready to build a chapel on the hillside of the transfiguration, nearly drowning when he tried to walk on water, promising that he would never deny Jesus, and yet the very first to deny that he even knew the Galilean when a servant girl outside the high priest’s courtyard accused him of being one of Jesus’ people.

Not that Peter was any different from the others. The others who slept in the garden the night of his arrest, the others who faltered at healing the sick with something of the same mastery as Jesus did, the others who thought that they might jockey for positions at his right and at his left when he came into his kingdom.

Judas betrayed him. Peter denied him. All of them fled the night of his arrest. And none of them with the exception of John, perhaps, are even mentioned anywhere near the cross in those last hours as he was dying, stretched out in agony. If those who love you most are not there to comfort you as you die... Well...

And after the resurrection, the disciples, having dismissed the witness of the women on Easter morning as an idle tale, are gathered together in hiding, “startled and terrified,” Luke says, by the appearance of the risen Lord whom they thought at first might be a ghost.

To these... these ones who had proven so fully human, so completely flawed, so utterly inept in so many respects - to these, Jesus gave the charge, “You will be my witnesses.”

And you have to wonder what Jesus saw, especially after all that they had done to let him down, to disappoint and abandon him, to walk away and want to forget the time and the experiences that they had shared with him.

We always seem to assume that the reaction of the disciples to the news of the resurrection was “Oh boy!” when in fact there is ample evidence that their reaction was more in the line of “Oh no!”

If he were dead and gone, they would have to deal with the broken dreams, the anger, the dashed hopes, the unfulfilled promise, and the grief, and that would be hard enough. There would be nothing more to do than to look after their own skins. Lay low for awhile until the heat was off, then go back to Capernaum and to the sea. Pick up their lives where they left off, start fishing again, wiser and better for the memories.

But if he were resurrected, risen from the dead, then all that he had said and all that they had believed about him was true. Their work was cut out for them, and it was the hard work of facing the dangers of the ones who had so threatened them before. It was the work of taking what they had seen and heard to their own community, to their synagogues, and families who had already rejected him, and eventually to the Gentiles.

They realized that what had happened to Jesus was now a possibility for them as well. That the message of good news that they were commissioned to take to the world was news that the world would resist. Little did they know how much it would resist. For they would oppose Temple and Empire, and in the case of many, it would cost them everything.

We can understand their reluctance to believe, their fear, their vulnerability. Their story after all sounds vaguely familiar. It is our story, the story of our doubt and fear, our confusion at the news of his resurrection, our reluctance to believe, our skepticism at the tale of the women and those who went to the tomb, our realization that if all that is said of him is true, it will cost us something, maybe everything.

No wonder we slip into doubt and confusion, it’s easier than believing what we have seen and heard. I mean who of us has not wondered exactly as those disciples wondered about the truth of the news that he is risen? And if he were to come to us in some convincing way, who of us would not still have our doubts? We are of so little faith most of the time.

Madeline L’Engle once wrote, “Sometimes I just know that I’m going to come down with an attack of atheism again. It’s like the flu. Spine flu I call it. I get ready to endure three or four days of
doubts and deep distance from God. Then through the grace of God, I find myself spiritually again.”

Nobody knows any better than we how imperfect a vessel we are, how given to selfishness, how constant in inconstancy, how hot then cold in our enthusiasms, how unreliable in our word, just ask your spouse or partner, or worse yet, your children!

But we are no better and no worse than those first disciples in whom Jesus placed his trust and to whom he said, “You are my witnesses.” It is at once the most challenging and the most humbling thing to which anyone might charge us.

And the question is, “What will you do with that commission?” Will you be his witness? And how will you do it?

Maybe we bear the witness in the same manner in which we have received it.

Some years ago, Fred Rogers, Mister Rogers of children’s television fame appeared before the National Press Club in Washington. The National Press Club is used to hearing top administration officials, diplomats, opinion makers on the most important issues of the day, and some members of the Club had joked that with Mister Rogers on the podium, they were probably in for a light lunch.

However, ...when Fred Rogers stood up to speak, he said that he knew that the room was filled with many of the best reporters in the nation, men and women who had achieved much. Rogers then took out a pocket watch and announced that he was going to keep two minutes of silence, and he invited everybody in the room to remember people in their past – parents, teachers, coaches, friends, and others – who made it possible for them to accomplish so much. And then Mister Rogers stood there, looking at his watch and saying nothing. The room grew quiet as the seconds ticked away, but... before Fred Rogers tucked away his watch, one could hear all around the room people sniffing as they were moved by the memories of those who made sacrifices on their behalf and who had given them many gifts.

Tom Long of Emory University says,

...if those of us who find meaning and comfort in the Christian faith were to take two minutes to reflect on how our faith came to be, few of us would say that we got it from a book, and none of us would say that we thought it up on our own. Quickly or gradually, we would begin to remember the people who spoke to us about God.”

“You are my witnesses,” Jesus said to those first disciples on Easter night. And along the way I have known some of the witnesses who have been so to me. Maybe you remember some who have been witnesses to you?

I remember my mother teaching me how to pray. It was bedtime prayer she taught me, but it was a way of saying “This is how we end the day, in the same way as we began, with God.” You baptismal parents have probably already started that, sitting by the crib of your children, thanking God for them every night and every morning, and in time, no doubt, when words come for them, you will share with them the mystery and the blessing of prayer.

I remember Vernon Weddle, the father of a friend who taught the youth fellowship at the small church where I grew up, and the concern and encouragement and nurture that he showed me and his own two sons, as he became a surrogate father for this kid who had none.

I remember Sunday school teachers, most of them women in the church, who told me that the tomb was empty, and I remember David Hopper and Donald Dawes, religion professors at college who told me that as a believer my head need not be empty.

I remember Bob Reeves, Chaplain at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital who showed me that
when you are with someone who is sick sometimes your hands can say more eloquent prayers than your words.

    I think about Marie Sibilla who organized a group of seniors all of whom who went down to City Council chambers and advocated for financial support for senior programs with the Caring Community here at the church. Evangelists for a gospel of social justice.

    I think about our junior highs and senior highs and their parents spending time with the men in the homeless shelter cooking a meal for them and setting out the cots and getting to know them over dinner at Christmas time. They’ll be doing it again next week.

    I think about all these children we’ve baptized in recent years and how I remind you every time that you’re making a promise as a congregation to be their Sunday School teachers and youth fellowship leaders, and whatever for good or for ill of the church that they will know they will know through you. Which is just another way of saying, “You are his witnesses.”

    And so we are.

    “You are my witnesses,” Jesus said. And I know... you are not as articulate as you would like to be, not as comfortable in speaking of such things that have to do with faith. You don’t know your Bible as well as you ought.

    But those first disciples didn’t know their Bible very well either. Jesus had to explain everything to them by retracing the scriptures with them and pointing out their meaning. And still they were a mixture of faith and disbelief.

    But we are his witnesses. And unfinished and incomplete as we are, the story has been given to us and we are meant to share it with others.

    Luke ends his gospel with this commission to be witnesses and then he begins his second book, the Book of Acts by telling us what happened when the disciples received the spirit and started witnessing to what they had seen and heard. And because they did, we are here today.

    I look around these stone walls, and think about all the ones who have gone before us. Old Polycarp, and Chrysostom, and Augustine in the paintings on the Reredos. Peter Waldo and Gaspard de Coligny in the windows over there. I’ll bet you don’t even know who they were. Frances Symington on this plaque over here. Janet Gustafson and Ginger Ormiston and John Perry on the September 11th plaque in the foyer. All these witnesses remembered more or less by us.

    And I wonder whether 50 or 100 or 200 years from now there will still be people gathering here to praise and worship and serve this One who bids us take courage and tell what we have seen and heard.

    Good news this morning. Unsettling news this morning. We are his witnesses.


1 Madeline L’Engle, Glimpses of Grace, p. 47
3 Ibid.
4 I am borrowing from James Sander’s dedication to the book, God Has a Story Too. He says, “For Sisters Agnes and Iris and my sister Nell, women who told me the tomb was empty, and for Ruth and Joe Brown Love who told me my head need not be.” Philadelphia, Fortress, 1979. Dedication page.