

Prayer of the Day: God of grace and mercy, you call us here to look for Jesus among the living not the dead. From the waters of baptism, from the storms of trouble and trial we face in life raise us again with him. Startle us with Christ's presence right beside us and deep within us. Renew our minds and hearts by your Spirit, then send us to serve until all people share the fullness of eternal life with you, through our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

A Witness for the Resurrection

Luke 24:1-35; Acts 10:34-43

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The Brazilian director Augusto Boal made famous a type of theatre where everyone present participates. Imagine gathering at the Franke and being divided into two groups. One group is given a scenario to act out while the other group watches, without comment, until the story ends. Then the first group starts acting out the scenario again. But this time, anyone in the audience who thinks the action should be different, who does not agree with a particular interpretation, can stop the play, rise up from their seat to replace one of the characters and, if they choose, alter the course of the action. They bring a new perspective, a fresh direction. If no one chooses to engage in this way, the scenario runs to its original conclusion. (from Kathy Galloway. *Hope, Friends, Love, Trust, Freedom: Daily Readings*, March 15)

The story of Easter resembles this kind of theatre. Pilate, Herod and company interpreted Jesus as a threat. His healing, his willingness to eat with anyone, his parables and Palm Sunday parade altered our world with a different kind of power. So they acted out a scenario – a tragedy of crucifixion whose script was as familiar to people in Jesus' day as Shakespeare in Elizabethan England.

God did not agree with their interpretation! God did not let it run to the conclusion expected by Pilate and all in his company, or by Peter and the disciples for that matter ... a final shameful and utterly demoralizing end for Jesus and his kingdom. In the resurrection, God changed the course of action and invites us to participate in this new perspective of hope, this fresh direction of life.

You know, friends, I've really come to love our rituals around holy week for the contrast of emotions, the fresh hope that seems to fill the air Easter. Especially on beautiful days like this ... when wasn't it just last year we were shoveling six inches of snow?! More than any other time of year it seems this week we really enter the story. We can feel what it's like to be with Jesus at the Last Supper; and when he was put into the tomb. And as the story continues today I suspect we might know what the disciples felt like on that road long ago. Their road-weary feet felt like their hearts – every pebble piercing sandals worn thin. They'd heard the women's incredible account. The way Luke describes it they were throwing words back and forth at each other, like pitching horse-shoes trying to ring the significance of it all, ending up more like hand-grenades exploding with more questions and confusion. Their voices strained tense with wonder, maybe tinged with a little despair. Their glances shifted, fearful. Would others pursue them, too? Uncertain about even where every next step was taking them. I suppose given the circumstances, their shattered expectations, it's little surprise they didn't recognize Jesus.

After all, sometimes isn't it hard for *us* to recognize the risen Christ among us? We've heard the story about the empty tomb and we try to make sense of it like quoting prophecy and recounting our experiences. What does it really mean for our lives here and hereafter? We want to believe the resurrection. Whether we're here this morning with implicit faith or more akin to skeptics, however trustingly or questioningly we simply wonder: can we trust that it's true?

I mean we've known the uncertainty – about our jobs and bank accounts and health. We've heard repeated news reports about execution-style killings, selfish greed, conflicts, injustices and abuses of power in our nation and our neighbors. We know our own frailties and failings. Is such loss of life, resources, relationships, even death in whatever forms and degrees we know it – is it not the end? After all our imperfect efforts for goodness can we really hope the world will be a better place?

Those disciples on the road had heard and seen the witnesses for the prosecution. And best they could tell Pilate's verdict was final. Religious self-interest, Roman power, the finality of death seemed to rule the day. So will headlines about our world's troubles and our conflicts; will our cancer or poor choices rule our day?

Well, dear friends, not on this day! God stops that play. God changes our story. God raises up Jesus to give a new perspective on those powers; to give us inspiration and strength to live every day.

As they walked along Jesus joined the disciples on their journey. Feel him beside us step for step, stride for stride. The disciples told him all they knew but somehow the truth hadn't yet touched their heart. The Risen Christ didn't yet have place in their life. How can anyone know how he feels when we seem foolish, slow of heart to believe to give our lives to God? I'll let you in a little backstage secret of ministers ... or at least this fumbling one. Times like Easter come around again. And though I love the lily cross, the larger crowd, the lighter spirit ... sometimes I struggle to know what to say. The story is so familiar. How do we gain a fresh perspective? On this day of days I come to see that faith is far less a matter of new things to say than fresh perspectives in how we live.

Friends, there will never be any rational proof of God's existence; any logical explanation of the resurrection. In the end, our faithfulness will ever be a question of looking for the love of Christ in our neighbors and strangers; offering the forgiveness of Christ to those who harm us; reaching out with the compassion of Christ to those he served; trusting that the grace and justice of Christ is only real way we will ever live together in the fullness of God's peace; feeling that whatever we face, however far we may wander, God is always with us.

According to Luke, that day was almost over. That day of life that begins in fear and emptiness; that builds a little courage even amidst confusion; that day that ends with a glimmer of hope, a glimpse of promise. "Stay with us," the disciples insisted to Jesus, "for the day is nearly over." Can we feel their longing at this day's beginning? Luke hopes so when he continues with the story of Peter in Acts. You see, in courtrooms and judgment halls of our world there are far too many witnesses for the prosecution, or maybe to the persecution. God calls us to be witnesses

for the resurrection! Peter urges us to rise up out of our pews and from our living room couches and off our chairs at work and alter that course of action; give life a new direction!

You know, one of the hardest places to find hope in recent months must have been on the streets of Port-au-Prince as the dust settled and the fear of aftershocks rippled through the darkened city at the end of that disastrous day. People just waiting, longing for the dawn when they could see the real extent of damage, find their next meal, continue searching for those trapped beneath the rubble ... and for any sense of security themselves. And just maybe in some miniscule way those shockwaves of longing reached us, inasmuch as we wanted to help, and felt frustrated, powerlessness to do much at all.

Will Willimon, a Methodist minister, reflects upon that sense of deflation and confusion we can feel about the way life seems. From two mission trips to Haiti with college students the memories that stand out for him are the people's laughter and singing. And from the news reports he received ... "As darkness fell upon Port-au-Prince after the earth heaved that January night, people danced in the streets and sang hymns. On CNN Anderson Cooper was incredulous." (*Christian Century*, 3/23/10, 11-12) They participated in that theatre of suffering! They rose up in God's grace to offer a different interpretation! They witnessed for the resurrection!

I don't know what hymns they were singing. If you ask me the ones for Easter we sing this day are as good as any as any others, some of the best in our book. And if you ask me we've heard that same Spirit resound here this morning. It started early as the choir came to practice. I sat in the back pew and heard them getting organized, finding there weren't enough scripts, that is sheet music, for everyone. Above all, I heard laughter ring out repeatedly! In that Spirit may we "lift our voice ... good Christians all ... and sing" in the words of our next hymn: "Christ is risen! Shout hosanna! ... Drink the wine of resurrection ... break the bread of new creation."

When Jesus was table with the disciples that day he blessed and broke the bread, and as he gave it to them their eyes were opened to recognize him. Their hearts were opened to feel him near. And that same hour they rose up from their seats and went to share all they had witnessed. Friends, every time we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim what we have come to know: the saving death of risen Lord as he comes again and again and again!

So come now amid all our personal as the world news echoes around us; as we share afternoon egg hunts, travel to or from family, and plan an Easter feast ... come, pass the plate and the promise of God's grace in our lives. I pray we may gain the strength to stop replaying the scenario of guilt and vengeance and fear and anxiety. Then go to our classrooms and living rooms, our places of work and into all the world! Rise up to offer a different interpretation, to change the course of action, to follow the direction of our risen Lord, to fulfill his script of compassion and justice and sacrificial love!

Dear friends, our world is full enough of witnesses for the prosecution! God does not agree with that kind of interpretation! We will be witnesses for the resurrection!

Thanks be to God!