

We Are Witnesses
Luke 24: 44-53
May 12, 2024
Rev. Scott Anderson

Thursday afternoon this week I received a call from a hospice nurse at Oakwood West that Traudie Holman, a beloved member of this church, was near death. She had asked to see me. In her final days Traudie is resting comfortably in her apartment she so loves, surrounded by her caring daughter and granddaughter. When I visited the air in that apartment was palpable. It was a sacred moment, and time to say farewell. To be present for such moments is one of the great privileges of my work as pastor.

There are many farewells we must say in life. The toughest ones are always when a loved one is approaching death's doorstep. But there are other goodbyes as well.

Some members of our Westminster extended family will be graduating soon from high school and college. They are in the process of saying goodbye to a significant stage in their lives. They are not yet mature adults, but they have crossed the finish line of childhood. Soon, some will move out of mom and dad's house. They will come back, but it will never be the same. Their destiny is more in their own hands now.

All of us say goodbye to friends who move away. A new job in another state beckons, or perhaps retirement, and they move out of our community and out of our lives. Saying goodbye to friends is something we do many times in life, but it's rarely easy.

This morning's passage from the final verses of the Gospel of Luke is a farewell scene. It marks the occasion when Jesus bids his disciples *adieu*. He has appeared to them following his resurrection demonstrating that his death was not the end and that they could live with the hope of life beyond the grave. Now it is time to depart, so he leads them out to Bethany, a few miles outside of Jerusalem, says a final blessing and ascends to heaven.

Luke's account is brief and provides few details, but it could not have been an easy goodbye. The disciples have spent three years with Jesus and lived at a level of intensity difficult to imagine. They walked many miles together and along the way they were captivated by his wisdom, amazed at his magical touch, and gradually learned the power of sacrificial love. No doubt they yearned to hold onto Jesus and never let him out of their sight; but his life on earth was finished. They had to say goodbye.

We might expect such a loss to leave them devastated, yet Luke records no such thing. Instead, he says that the disciples "returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God." Why joy? Why not despair? For one, his ascension affirmed their hope that life in this world is not all there is. There is life after life. Yet this final scene not only affirmed their belief in life beyond this world, but it also infused them with a passion to get the most out of life while still in this world.

The ascension of Jesus is not merely an ancient tale describing how people in a pre-scientific era believed the resurrected Jesus was beamed up to heaven. It is a pivotal event in the Christian story. It is when the mission of Jesus was handed off to his followers. It was the passing of the baton, the beginning of a relay that has lasted centuries. In effect, Jesus said, "I have shown you the way. Now, it's up to you to continue my mission. You are my witnesses."

Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Spanish mystic wrote, "God of love, help us to remember that Christ has no body on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are

the eyes to see the needs of the world. Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone. Ours are the feet with which (Christ) is to go about doing good."

I suspect the ascension of Jesus is not a favorite story of those who want to leave everything to God. It's not a top ten pick of those who think being spiritual means to tell God through prayer what God needs to do to clean up our messes.

The ascension of Jesus marks the moment when we received our marching orders. In essence, Jesus says, "Through you the homeless will be sheltered and the hungry fed. Through you the sick will be healed and the grief-stricken comforted. Through you the weak will be protected and the oppressed set free. Through you the faith will be spread, and the ways of God will become known."

Being handed such tremendous responsibility is sobering. Those first disciples may have wanted to protest: "Jesus, you really cannot expect us to handle all of this!" But before they could voice their trepidation, Jesus said, "Even though I will no longer be physically present with you, you will not be alone. Go to Jerusalem and wait. Soon you will receive the power you need - the strength, the courage, and the hope you need. "Then the text says that after Jesus departs, the disciples return to Jerusalem with great joy.

That concludes Volume 1 of Luke's writings and sets the stage for Volume 2: The Acts of the Apostles. It is in Acts that we read of the transformation that took place in the followers of Jesus, which we will celebrate next week at Pentecost. These previously indecisive and shivering individuals were transformed into brave, confident and energetic witnesses who created the first Christian communities and began to spread the faith against staggering odds.

Some years ago, two men from Chicago invented the Life Clock. After purchasing it, you program your birth date and gender into the clock's memory, and it begins counting down the hours, minutes, and seconds remaining in your life.

To keep that ticking away of time from getting too depressing, the clock flashes little inspirational messages every sixty seconds. The messages include the profound, such as: "All resistance begins in the mind," as well as the practical: "Eat your vegetables."

Shortly after the clock appeared, a newspaper reporter asked one of its inventors if he thought the clock was a bit morbid. "Not at all," the man said, "because once you see that time is quantified, the quality of your life starts to increase." His partner chimed in, "We're born, they wind us up and say, 'Go and see what you can make of your life.'"

God urges us to live each day as if it were our last, and that intensifies our experience of life. It prompts us to get to the heart of the matter.

Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund once wrote, "Do not die before you die. See and listen. Bask in the countless miracles and beauty all around you. Stay awake and alert to the incredible currents of life everywhere."

Author Wendell Berry says it best, "The question before me, now that I am old, is not how to be dead, which I know from enough practice, but how to be alive."

As we have seen a rise in antisemitism in recent weeks, I can't help but think of Germany in the 1930s. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and theologian, had every reason in the world to keep the world at arm's length, to keep his religious commitments in the realm of the spirit, totally separated and safe from what was going on in the world around him. Most of his fellow German Christians managed to do that in the 1930s, as the Nazis came to power.

As individual liberties began to disappear—freedom of expression, freedom of assembly—as Jews at first were blamed in the official newspapers for everything that was wrong, then tormented, demonized, their property confiscated, their businesses destroyed, finally

rounded up and shipped away to concentration camps, German Christians looked the other way. “It’s not our business. It’s politics. It’s just the way things are in the world. Our concern is religion, matters of the spirit, our souls, our future in heaven, not what is transpiring in the world around us.”

In the same way, American Christians in the South in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries averted their eyes from the ugliness of slavery, segregation, and racism. “It’s not our business,” they said. “Our business, the business of the church, is the spiritual realm, the health of our souls, not what is happening in the world.”

Sadly, some nineteenth century Presbyterian church leaders in the South, pushed by some Christians of moral courage and conscience to take a stand, to declare themselves, to condemn slavery, refused, and came up with a doctrine to justify it. They called it the “Spirituality of the Church.”

In Germany, Bonhoeffer, a gentle intellectual, a pacifist, concluded that his faith demanded more of him. His faith would not allow him not to see what was happening. Many of you know his story: he joined the Resistance and became part of the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler—not in spite of his Christian faith, but because of it.

The plot failed. Bonhoeffer was arrested and executed a few days before the war ended. *His Letters and Papers from Prison* is a modern Christian classic and should be on every Christian’s reading list.

From his prison cell he wrote to a friend that Christianity doesn’t shield us from life but “plunges us into all the dimensions of life.” He went on, “During the last year or so I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity...I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life...Later I discovered that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe.”

In Barbara Brown Taylor’s book, *An Altar in the World*, she remembers a question an older, wiser clergy friend asked: “What is saving your life now?” The book is her answer: An Altar—in the World. She writes so eloquently:

“There is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experience of life on earth...engaging in the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them. My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world.

And so here is the great irony of Ascension Sunday, as Christ leaves this world, he sends us full throttle into it. Because we are his witnesses, to be totally present here and now. To be compassionate, to strive for justice, to work for peace, and to experience the utter joy of being alive.

What time do you have on your Life Clock? What will you do with your precious time?
Amen.