

Rise Up and Witness: You Are His Martyr

A sermon based on Acts 1:1-11

In 1563 a man by the name of John Foxe first published his book that's made every list of Christian Classics—The Book of Martyrs. In it he describes the persecution and violent death of countless Christians from the stoning of Stephen to the murder of his own contemporaries under "Bloody" Mary of England. Many Christians around the globe, in places like India, China, and Afghanistan, are still martyred today—that is, they are killed for what they believe.

But did you know that the word "martyr" didn't originally mean one who dies for what they believe? In our text for this morning the Greek word, "*martures*," is translated, "witnesses." And in this sense of the word, every Christian is a martyr. We might not all be killed for our faith, but we are all witnesses. And that word, "witness" has a double meaning. First it's one who has seen something take place—"I witnessed the accident." The other meaning, is to testify what was seen—"I witnessed in court."

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he reminded his disciples that he would continue to act... through them! They were to be his witnesses—his martyrs! And the directions he gave them didn't apply just to them, but they apply to us too. Jesus has risen...from the dead...into heaven. Now he wants us to rise up and witness. You see, our Risen Savior still acts... through us. Every Christian is a martyr because every Christian is a witness—we have seen what Jesus has done. And we now testify about what Jesus has done.

As Luke set out to write his second volume to Theophilus (the Gospel of Luke was the first), he begins where he left off in the Gospel of Luke—with Jesus ascension. (Luke 24:50-53) But here Luke goes into a little more detail. Here he tells us more of what Jesus said to his disciples right before he left, including that final point of instruction Jesus gave his disciples. ***"You will be my witnesses," he told them, "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."***

An old fable says when Jesus finally arrived in heaven the angel Gabriel asked him, "Now what?" To which Jesus replied, "Now they go and tell everyone what I've done for them." "But," Gabriel replied, "What if they don't do it? What if they grow lazy? What if they lose their zeal? What then?" And Jesus answered, "I've made no other plans. I'm counting on them."

Now, it's only a fable, but the point is true. Jesus made these disciples his witnesses. But what made them qualified to carry the gospel message? They were witnesses, ones who would testify, because they were witnesses, ones who had seen what Jesus had done. In Luke 24:(46-48) the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples and told them, ***"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."***

At his ascension, Jesus' time with his disciples had finally drawn to a close. And even though they only spent three short years with Jesus, just imagine what an exciting three years they must have been! Just think of all those disciples saw!

They saw Jesus do countless miracles, walking on water and calming storms, healing the blind and lame, the deaf and mute, the crippled and the leprous. Some of them saw Jesus shining in his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. They saw him arrested and beaten and one even watched him be crucified.

And all eleven saw the resurrected Jesus alive—physically! They even ate with him! Luke reminds us, **"After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God."** And now they saw the finale as they stood there watching Jesus rise into the sky—**"taken up before their very eyes [until] a cloud hid him from their sight."** What amazing things these disciples saw! What spectacular things they witnessed!

"Well, sure!" you might be thinking, "They witnessed some pretty amazing things! But what about me?! I didn't see any of that! I haven't seen any healings apart from those phony ones on TV. Transfiguration? I missed that one! Were you there when they crucified my Lord? I wasn't. Nor have I ever seen the resurrected Jesus standing before me. I'm not a witness to any of that!"

But friends, you are witnesses of all of that and more. Today we finish what's been called the festival half of the church year—that half of the year where we celebrate the major events of Christ's life—from his birth at Christmas to his death and resurrection at Holy Week and beyond and now finally to his Ascension.

Over the past six months we may not have seen Jesus physically standing here among us. But we have seen him clearly. In fact, even more clearly than the disciples had up to his ascension. We saw him born in a lowly manure-scented barn as the King of the Universe humbled himself for us. We have seen the miracles he performed to demonstrate his divinity as well as his compassion for mankind. We watched during Holy Week as he suffered hell to pay for our sins—our sins of failing to witness boldly for him and every sin! We've seen the resurrected Savior show himself to us to assure us that our forgiveness is sealed in heaven!

Friends, we can't say that we haven't seen Jesus. We have seen all these things and more! We are witnesses of what Jesus has done. And we can continue to witness all he's done as we read and study and hear and learn his Word.

But then, dear friends, having witnessed all these things, we don't just stand around looking into the sky. We share the message with others. And we don't need any special training or education because these are no more necessary for the Christian witness than they are for the witness in the courtroom. People are not called to the witness stand because they have training or education, but because they have seen or experienced something that's important to the case being tried.

Because of the things we've witnessed, because we've seen for ourselves what Jesus has done for us, we have all it takes to witness—to testify about what Jesus has done for others...

As Jesus ascended into heaven the disciples must have been thinking, "Now what?!" Back in verse 6 we get a glimpse of their confusion when they ask Jesus, **"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"** "Now," they asked, "are you finally going to drive out the Romans for us? Now will you bring judgment on all who have opposed you?" And in a sense, Jesus told them, "Don't worry about it." Instead of worrying about things God hadn't revealed, they should focus on the task at hand. And in verse 8, Jesus gave them their task again as he reiterated that Great Commission.

He said, **"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."**

This verse really lays out the outline of the rest of the book of Acts. If you haven't done it in a while re-read the book of Acts sometime and you'll see how it's all about the witness of Jesus' apostles. From here—the Mount of Olives—the disciples would spread the message where they were already at—in Jerusalem. Then the message would spread even further to the outlying regions of Judea and Samaria. Finally, through the apostle Paul and others, the gospel began its quick journey around the globe.

How did these men, who only weeks earlier were found cowering behind locked doors, accomplish such an amazing feat? Well, they didn't. Jesus promised them, "**you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.**" And that's exactly what happened. After Pentecost, they were empowered to boldly say, "**We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard,**" (Acts 4:20) and, "**We must obey God rather than men!**" (Acts 5:29) In the Holy Spirit and clarity in the gospel that he brought they found the courage to get busy and share what they had seen.

And notice what Luke said in verses 1 and 2: "**In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven...**" Did you catch that? He wrote about what Jesus began to do. In other words, Jesus wasn't done. Not even after his Ascension! It was Jesus who would continue to act through them and give them the strength and the words to speak. In him they even found the courage to be martyred—killed in some pretty horrible ways—for Jesus.

And friends we not only share the task of witnessing with the disciples, but we share the same power they had. We too have the Holy Spirit living and working in us and through us. We too have clarity in understanding the gospel. We too have Jesus acting in us and through us. We too have courage and "**cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.**"

And we too witness in our "Jerusalem," starting right where we're at in our existing areas of influence, as we share the gospel with our friends and family. We witness when we pray together around the dinner table, read a family devotion and teach our kids about Jesus and about faithful worship attendance. We witness when we say no to temptation when our friends are heaping on the peer pressure.

And we witness in our "Judea and Samaria," a bit out of our comfort zone with people who are different than us, as we share the gospel with our neighbors and co-workers. We witness when we politely ask the boss to give us a schedule that allows us to worship our Savior. We witness when we sacrifice our time and energy to help out a co-worker seeking nothing in return. We witness when we visit our neighbor in the hospital and tell him we'll pray for him, or even when we simply say hello and act friendly across the fence.

And we witness to the ends of the earth, not necessarily as traveling missionaries, but through our Synod, which sends missionaries out on our behalf. We witness when we give our regular offerings to God—offerings used to reach souls here in Fairbanks and through our synod and our webcast around the world—giving not because we must or out of guilt, but because we've witnessed what Jesus has done for us. And we want to share that amazing gospel with others.

On October 15, 1940, 480 German aircraft dropped 386 tons of explosives and 70,000 bombs on the city of London. While Londoners sought shelter in their basements, the city of London with all its historical buildings burned out of control. But Winston Churchill intervened. "**To the basement,**" he cheered, "**must be replaced by 'To the roofs!'**" And the people answered with courage. When the

nightly attacks resumed, with little to no protection, risking (and often giving) their lives, they took to the streets and rooftops, serving as firefighters in order to save much of the city.

Can you imagine what would have happened if the disciples hadn't taken to the streets with the gospel message? If they'd instead went back into hiding behind locked doors? Where would we be today? But they didn't. They did become his witnesses, risking (and often giving) their lives, they took to the ends of the earth, serving as witnesses of what Jesus has done to save countless souls. And through them and their work, the Gospel of God's love and forgiveness through Jesus has come down to you and to me today. And through them God has saved our souls.

Likewise, countless souls in future generations may not have the same opportunities to hear the gospel if you don't witness. But the promises of Jesus, the things he's done for us that we've witnessed, and the Holy Spirit he's sent us give us the courage to risk our reputations, our careers, our very lives if necessary to witness for Jesus. Friends, rise up, confident you will rise up to be with Jesus in heaven one day. And with that confident, rise up and be a witness, a martyr, for our risen and ascended Lord. Amen.