

"Witnesses of These Things"
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
Luke 24:36-48
April 14, 2024 — Third Sunday of Easter

Where were you on Monday afternoon?

Some of us gathered with family or friends on the deck; some of us joined watch parties in parks or schoolyards. Some made the pilgrimage to the path of totality; others simply paused their work to step outside. But many of us — many across our land — watched the clock, then watched the skies. Because, on Monday, something remarkable happened. Celestial bodies aligned. The sky turned dark. The temperature dropped. The sun almost disappeared from view. To say that the world turned is an oversimplification. But that's kind of what it felt like on the ground.

Yes, the solar eclipse was a wonder to behold. It was remarkable, in the truest sense of the word: we felt moved to make remarks about it. We experienced something extraordinary and, then, we told the story.

Some of us took to social media, posting pictures of smiling faces with eclipse glasses or snapshots of a sliver of sun. The best-positioned and best-prepared shared time-lapse videos that captured the full eclipse. My parents — who *happened* to be traveling across Illinois on Monday afternoon — found themselves in the path of totality at the perfect time. So, at 3:33 p.m., I received a text message: *We saw the full halo corona and the diamond ring as the moon started to move away! It was very cool!* Children came home with science lessons on their lips; they were so excited to share what they'd seen. Throughout the week, we asked one another questions: Where were you? Did the sky cloud over? What did you see?

We told the story because, together, we experienced something remarkable. And, now, we are witnesses. Yes, we are witnesses of these things.

The 24th chapter of Luke's Gospel is a whole collection of people bearing witness. Something remarkable happens, so the community begins telling the story. First two men in dazzling clothes share the good news with a group of women, who are stunned to find the tomb empty. Then, the women rush to tell the Eleven and the other disciples. Later that day, two travelers on the Emmaus road report rumors of resurrection to Jesus, himself, because their eyes are kept from recognizing him. And, then — after their eyes have been opened to

behold the risen Lord — these same travelers return to Jerusalem and tell the Eleven and those gathered with them what they have heard and seen.

While they are still talking — while they are *still* talking about these very things — Jesus shows up. The risen Christ stands among his disciples and says: *Peace be with you.*

As today's text tells the tale, the disciples are startled and terrified; they think they are seeing a ghost. We might wonder why they react this way, since — by now — the group has heard reports of resurrection at least two times. I must admit: I wonder why they are so slow to believe the good news, why they are so slow to trust that the Messiah has actually risen from the dead, just as Jesus said he would. But who am I to judge the people who experienced these events firsthand, with all the attendant trauma and tragedy? Who am I to judge the *only* generation of disciples who did *not* know this story would end in triumph when they began their journeys with Jesus? More to the point, what good does my judgment do? After all, when we focus on the disciples' failings, we fail to see the grace of this moment.

And this is the grace of this moment: Despite the disciples' doubt — perhaps, *because* of the disciples' doubt — Jesus stands among them and says: *Peace be with you.* Then he shows them his hands and his feet. He invites them to touch and see, to experience the truth of resurrection. Furthermore — while they are “wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness,” (CEB) as one translation puts it — Jesus asks for something to eat. The disciples share their meal, and he eats a piece of fish in their presence. And, through ordinary examples of human connection, Jesus shows his followers that something extraordinary has taken place. He makes clear that the person standing in their midst is not some disembodied spirit, some mysterious messenger from another realm. The person standing before them is none other than their resurrected Lord. His hands are the same hands that broke bread for them to share. His feet are the same feet that a nameless woman anointed with oil from an alabaster jar. His voice is the same voice that called them to follow. And, now, this voice proclaims peace to a room still shrouded in death, despite the rumors of resurrection these disciples have heard.

It is a wonder to behold. Something remarkable has happened, indeed! No longer must these disciples rely *only* on reports of resurrection, for now Jesus has gifted them with an experience of their own. Now they can see and believe that the world has turned — maybe not in the alignment of sun and moon — but in every way that matters. The old world has turned upside down because everything Jesus told them has proven true! Resurrection is real! And if Jesus' promise that the Messiah would rise from the dead can be believed, then Scripture's promises can be believed, too! Yes, Scripture's promise that God can and is drawing the world closer to the divine dream of peace is true, as well.

This promise is behind the risen Lord's greeting of peace. When Jesus says, *peace be with you*, he's not simply promising his disciples relief from the gripping fear of the past three days. The risen Christ is promising the peace of God's *shalom* — the fulfillment of God's vision of wholeness and well-being for all creation. *Shalom* conveys the promise of a world at rest, freed from the forces of sin and death; a world where justice and peace kiss each other and love and forgiveness are extended freely. This is the world the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms foretell, and the world that Christ's victory over death inaugurates.

It is all a wonder to behold. Something remarkable — something extraordinary — has happened. And the disciples must tell the story. "You are witnesses," Jesus tells them. "You are witnesses of these things." Not just the things you have seen today — a resurrected body with flesh and bone — but the things of resurrection: of peace and love and hope winning the victory over fear and evil and death. "You are witnesses of *these* things," Jesus says.

And — wouldn't you know? — this identity envelops all of us who have been baptized into Christ, who have shared — by water — in Jesus' death and resurrection. Somehow we, too, are called to be witnesses of these things. But, how can we, when we've *not* beheld the resurrected body of our Lord? We've not seen the rising of *God's Son*, at least not in the same way that we've watched the darkening of *earth's* sun.

And yet, I imagine that *you* have encountered the risen Christ, perhaps in some of the ways *I* have encountered the risen Christ ... Often in ordinary moments of human connection or through the common stuff of human life: through water splashing across a baby's forehead or bread broken and shared; in the sacred moments that unfold at the bedside of an ailing friend, or in the surprising moments when you recognize Christ in a stranger's face. In ordinary rituals of care — feeding hungry bellies, tending hurting bodies, comforting broken hearts. In such glimpses of grace, we sense that something remarkable has happened. And when the ordinary gives way to the extraordinary, we behold the wonders of God.

Such moments may not bring us face-to-face with the resurrected body of Jesus of Nazareth. But — by the power of the Spirit — our Living Lord still comes to us, just as the risen Christ appeared to those first disciples. And — by the power of the Spirit — our experiences of grace are no less real, no less true.

So, yes, we can be witnesses of these things. We are called to be witnesses of these things. Not just that Christ is alive. But that the things of resurrection are real — that hope and love are stronger than evil and fear. That God is still drawing the world closer to the divine dream of peace.

There are so many ways to tell the story — to continue the tradition of witness that began long ago, when two men in dazzling clothes shared the good news with astounded women beside an empty tomb. Sometimes, we share the good news with our words. Often, we share it with our deeds. Sometimes, using the language of faith. Often, through ordinary acts of human connection that require no language at all.

Two weeks ago the people of Antwerp, Belgium decided to host a community meal.¹ This was no ordinary community meal. For starters, it was scheduled for a day that two religious traditions have set apart as sacred. For Christians, it was Easter Sunday — the day when the church breaks its Lenten fast and enters a 50-day season of feasting. For Muslims, it was the 21st day of Ramadan, a month when the faithful who fast during daylight hours welcome sunset with a feast. To celebrate both tradition's holy days, the entire neighborhood was invited to gather around a common table that stretched two-kilometers long. So, at sundown on March 31st, seven thousand people gathered to break bread. The community that formed around that two-kilometer table was comprised of Christians and Muslims, of people of other faiths and people of no faith. But, by coming together, by sharing a meal and conversation — the ordinary stuff of life — this gathering of humanity bore witness to peace and love and hope in a world where fear and violence often seem to hold sway.

This was not a gathering of Christ-followers — of people charged to proclaim the good news to all nations. It was an intentionally interfaith effort. But, still, I'd suggest it was a testament to the presence of the risen Christ in this world. After all — as a couple of those interviewed at this meal observed — when we live in an age of distrust and division, of tension and trouble, gathering people around a common table tells the world that a different way is possible. It is a profound witness to the peace that God promises, to a world where steadfast love triumphs — always and forever — over the forces of death.

You are witnesses of these things, Jesus says. Friends, we are witnesses of these things: Not just that Christ is alive. But that the things of resurrection are real — that hope and love are stronger than evil and fear. That God is still drawing the world closer to the divine dream of peace. So let us go forth to tell the story, trusting that the Spirit will use our ordinary words, our ordinary deeds, our ordinary offerings to invite others into the extraordinary experience of God's grace.

¹ See, for instance: The Times and The Sunday Times, "Antwerp residents celebrate Iftar and Easter together," (April 1, 2024), [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)