

“A Witness Protection Program”

Psalm 4; Acts 3:12-19; I John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

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Today’s message is summarized in three verses of scripture:

[Jesus] said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

(Luke 24:46-48)

“You are witnesses of these things.” To be a witness is not always easy or pleasant. Sometimes it is so risky, owing to the evil and vindictiveness of the accused person, that the government will place the witness in a witness protection program. Names and identity are changed and a new life is begun.

This seems to me a metaphor for being a Christian witness. Perhaps it is not as extreme as the disciple Peter, whose name was changed from Simon, but being witnesses to Jesus Christ changes our identity and begins a new life. For some of us this happened so long ago, and we have spent so many years in the Church, that we have forgotten what our other life was, or might have been, like. For others, a new or reclaimed identity as Christians, with or without recovery from serious sin, makes us more conscious of this new life in Christ.

Unlike the government programs, the kind of protection guaranteed by a Christian witness protection program is not protection from bodily harm. The recent murder of over 130 college students in Kenya is only the most recent testimony to that. Self-identified Muslim terrorists asked students if they were Christian and murdered those who said yes. What would we have done?

In one sense, the question is hypothetical. We live in a country where our religious freedoms are constitutionally guaranteed. Yet in another sense, an old question is still a good litmus test for self-examination: *“If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”*

As we discern an answer, let us reflect on those things about which Jesus says we are witnesses:

1. The Messiah is to suffer.

Most of us have little appreciation for the scandal of this assertion. In the time of Jesus, it was believed the Messiah (literally, *God’s anointed*) was to come in glory and power. Of course, we rehearse this tension every year during Holy Week. But Jesus’ suffering sacrifice is so much a part of our orthodox beliefs that we have forgotten how radical it was to those first followers. It would be as if we said, “The President of the United States must suffer and die for our redemption.” Everything we say and do, of course in relation to our President is designed to preserve his safety and security.

There are two Biblical traditions about Messiah: one supports a show of strength as he comes in glory, bringing spiritual, national and ethnic redemption. The other tradition is a Messiah who suffers, with Isaiah 53 being the flagship text. It is the second tradition in which Jesus roots himself: crossing ethnic and social boundaries, associating with undesirable people, speaking and acting on behalf of those people at the margins of polite society.

In the 2014 book Seven Levers, Bishop Robert Schnase (the author of Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations), quotes Lovett Weems in saying that the Church needs to be constantly asking the “So, what?” question. We do whatever we do. So what? As followers of this suffering Christ, the end of the thread is that we participate in God’s plan for ushering in God’s kingdom on earth. (Schnase, Robert, *Seven Levers: Missional Strategies for Conferences*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014, p. 93)

We are witnesses of these things. How are we, and will we continue, to translate this witness into action?

2. The Messiah is to rise from the dead on the third day.
On Easter Day I told the story of Tony Robinson, a United Church of Christ pastor and coach to pastors, who experienced his own conversion around the resurrection of Jesus. The first half of his ministry he understood it as a metaphor, the second half as fact.

Where people get messed up, I think, is confusing resurrection with resuscitation. Jesus was not resuscitated, he was resurrected. There is a mystery to this and Protestants, particularly 21st century American Protestants, are not very good with mystery.

Yet mystery is the consistent thread in the resurrection appearances. Mary doesn't recognize Jesus until he speaks to her (John 20:16). The travelers on the road to Emmaus don't recognize Jesus until he breaks bread with them (Luke:24:30-31). Jesus disappears and reappears like a Spirit (Luke 24:37; John 20:19), even in spite of rooms with locked doors; yet has wounds (John 20:27) and eats fish (Luke 24:23) and makes breakfast (John 21:12), all things that you or I would find rather ordinary in our very human bodies. Ultimately St. Paul, uses the metaphor of seed and plant to describe how we die and are resurrected, declaring, "Lo, I tell you a mystery." (I Corinthians 15:51)

Metaphor conveys mystery. Consider "Life Inside the Womb" by Wayne Rice:

Life Inside the Womb

Once upon a time, twin boys were conceived in the womb. Seconds, minutes, hours passed as the two embryonic lives developed. The spark of life grew and each tiny brain began to take shape and form. With the development of their brain came feeling, and with feeling, perception -- a perception of surroundings, of each other, and their own lives. They discovered that life was good and they laughed and rejoiced in their hearts.

One said to the other, "We are sure lucky to have been conceived and to have this wonderful world."

The other chimed in, "Yes, blessed be our mother who gave us life and each other."

Each of the twins continued to grow and soon their arms and fingers, legs and toes began to take shape. They stretched their bodies and churned and turned in their little world. They explored it and found the life cord which gave them life from their mother's blood. They were grateful for this new discovery and sang, "How great is the love of our mother -- that she shares all she has with us!"

Weeks passed into months and with the advent of each new month, they noticed a change in each other and in themselves.

"We are changing," one said. "What can it mean?"

"It means," said the other, "that we are drawing near to birth."

An unsettling chill crept over the two. They were afraid of birth, for they knew that it meant leaving their wonderful world behind.

Said the one, "Were it up to me, I would live here forever."

"But we must be born," said the other. "It has happened to all the others."

Indeed, there was evidence inside the womb that the mother had carried life before theirs. "And I believe that there is life after birth, don't you?"

"How can there be life after birth?" cried the one. "Do we not shed our life cord and also the blood tissue when we are born? And have you ever talked to anyone that has been born? Has anyone ever re-entered the womb after birth to describe what birth is like? NO!" As he spoke, he fell into despair, and in his despair he moaned, "If the purpose of conception and our growth inside the womb is to end in birth, then truly our life is senseless." He clutched his precious life cord to his breast and said, "And if this is so, and life is absurd, then there really can be no mothers!"

"But there is a mother," protested the other. "Who else gave us nourishment? Who else created this world for us?"

"We get our nourishment from this cord -- and our world has always been here?" said the one. "And if there is a mother -- where is she? Have you ever seen her? Does she ever talk to you? No! We invented the mother when we were young because it satisfied a need in us. It made us feel secure and happy."

Thus, while the one raved and despaired, the other resign himself to birth and placed his trust in the hands of his mother. Hours turned into days, and days into weeks. And soon it was time. They both knew their birth was at hand, and they both feared what they did not know. As the one was first to be conceived, so he was the first to be born, the other following.

They cried as they were born into the light. They coughed out fluid and gasped the dry air. And when they were sure they had been born, they opened their eyes -- seeing life after birth for the very first time. What they saw was the beautiful eyes of their mother, as they were cradled lovingly in her arms. They were home.



3. Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

The reading from I John 3 today was troubling, at least to me. Oh, look, the first three verses were great: we're God's children; and when God is revealed we will be like him; and if you have that hope you are purified as God is pure. Great stuff!

But then comes verse 6: "*No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.*"

So I'd like to think I abide in him. But I sin. You sin. According to St. Paul, "*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" (Romans 3:23) What is our hope? According to Jesus, it is to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. I did a word search, hoping this word "proclaim" in the original Greek New Testament had some wiggle room in it. It doesn't. It means exactly what we think: to announce, to preach, to proclaim.

As I said to the Confirmation class a couple of weeks ago, being a Christian can really be inconvenient and annoying. In this case, it is because to **proclaim** forgiveness and repentance I have to **practice** repentance and forgiveness. It calls to mind the old bromide, "Excuse me, but your actions speak so loudly I can't hear what you're saying." "Forgive us our trespasses" we entreat the Lord each Sunday in the words he gave us "as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Funny thing, though. When we actually do it, we really do experience the peace Jesus bestowed on the disciples. We are witnesses of these things: that God redeems suffering, that the resurrection promise is real, and that turning back to God and forgiving ourselves and others leads to full life. And that is, truly, a witness protection program.