

Sermon Easter 3b 2021: You Are God's Witnesses

Introduction: A Challenge and a Promise

You are witnesses – you;

Few words of Jesus or from the pulpit will send good Christian people scurrying
And trying to hide from our call to live as Christians here and in the world
Than these words of Jesus at the end of Luke's Gospel
Than the words –you are witnesses of these things
You are witnesses of the risen Lord at work in your life and in the world;
Because most of us would rather not have to witness; thank you very much.

Oh, we witness in our lives when we've read a good book or seen a good movie;

We witness about a good restaurant after a good meal;

We witness about our political preferences;

And we are solid witnesses about our sports teams.

But witnessing about our faith, about our relationship with God;

Our involvement with church and outreach activities;

Is far down most of our lists for witnessing.

We'd rather have Maurice or Emily or Liz or one of the Statesmen witness on our behalf

They're trained, professional Christians, after all, and would do a much better job;

I'll just let them take care of that witnessing thing.

And you know we'd love to do it on your behalf; we love this witnessing stuff;

But even on the busiest Sunday, about the best we can do is 1800 people here and online;

And at last count, I understand that there are over seven billion people in the world

And we simply can't be the only ones to witness

To Christ's presence in our lives and in the world

“You are witnesses,” Jesus says, “You.”

And by your witness, by the way you spend time with God each day

By the way you live your lives here and in the world;
By the way you talk about your faith with others and invite them in
You are Christ's witnesses.

And without all of us spending time with God
Without living and speaking about God's love and plan for the world,
Then we will not grow in our own faith and life with God
And the world will never know.

But when we choose to accept Jesus' call to be His witnesses;
When we choose to spend time to become empowered by His presence in us
And when we choose to live and speak of our faith in the world
God's kingdom draws near and God's kingdom grows.

A Church that Died

You know one of the things that I've been doing the past twenty-three years
Is reminding all of us that we have a particular mission, an important focus;
And that is to know God in Jesus Christ and to make Christ known to others;
I must say it over 300 times a year here at St. David's
And who knows how many times elsewhere
When I'm talking about this great Christian community
And teaching others about the need for individuals and for churches to focus on mission.

I speak about our mission so often
Because it's easy to lose sight of what we're really all about as Christians
And, it keeps us from focusing on the wrong thing.

Paul Conn, in his book Making It Happen,
Tells a story about how one day, while living in Atlanta,
He was looking for restaurants he might try.

As he scrolled around, he came across a restaurant called the Church of God Grill;
Curious, he dialed the number and a cheery voice answered,
“Hello! Church of God Grill, can I help you.”

Conn asked the man how the restaurant had gotten such an unusual name;
The man chuckled and said, “Well, we had a little mission church down here,
And we started selling chicken dinners after church to help pay the bills;
People liked the chicken and we did such a good business,
That eventually, we had to cut back on church services
Because it was keeping us from cooking and serving.

After a while, we just closed down the church altogether
And kept on serving the chicken dinners;
We kept the name we started with, and that’s why it’s the Church of God Grill

Just as it’s easy in life to lose our focus, to lose sight of how we want to live;
And why we’re doing what we’re doing and living the way we’re living;
It’s even easier for a church to lose focus,
With so many different people and different experiences
And different opinions about what church should be.

We forget the main mission and start going in the wrong direction
Or in no direction at all, just maintaining ourselves in some form;
But not as a burning, alive community of witnesses
That experience God’s presence and share it with others.

So in the time I have left, let me talk about the two characteristics of being a witness;
So that you may grow in your life with God
And make an even bigger difference in the lives of others.

Spending Time with God

The first characteristic of being a witness is spending time with God;

You can't be a witness if you don't know God and the core of our message;
We all are called to spend time with God;
And the good news in this is that God loves to spend time with us.

Two stories from children may help us begin to grasp the reality - to remember this is real
That God is actually present here in our lives as He was with the first disciples
In that upper room after the resurrection.

The first story comes from a mother in Ohio who was worshiping with her family
And realized that instead of their customary grape juice at the communion,
They were serving real wine;
She leaned over to her young son and warned in a whisper,
"This is the real thing this morning."
The boy's eyes grew wide and he responded in a loud voice, "Blood?"

Everyone in church gasped, except the pastor who was laughing out loud,
And stood up and said, "Not exactly, but God is here this morning."
The church got very quiet.

The other story comes from a Sunday School teacher who once asked her students
To talk about how they felt about church and the students responded in the usual ways:
Some said something silly to get their friends to laugh,
While others tried to be more serious.

One of the girls was new to the class and felt uncomfortable answering out loud at first;
She and her family had moved to this community in North Carolina
After Hurricane Katrina wiped out their lives in Mississippi;
And this church had taken them in, found them a home,
Had given support and helped her parents find jobs.

That Sunday she had an answer for the class, one that reflected her experience of church

She raised her hand and said that going to church was like walking into the heart of God.
I like that.

That's a description of the church as it can be, like walking into the heart of God.

We cannot lose sight of the expectation and the reality that Christ is here with us;
But we have to make room to allow that presence, that love,
That power to touch us and fill us and change us.

So, to live our lives as witnesses,
We need to take time every day;
And pray or be still, so that we can experience God's love and presence.

And don't get me wrong, it's not that God won't be there if you don't come to church
Or don't spend time in prayer every day, you just won't notice God with you;
You won't be open to His power in your life;
Like a log pulled from a fire, pulled away from the flames,
Our lives will smolder and the fire of faith will die out apart from God.

Sharing Your Faith

The second characteristic of being a witness is much more public
And it's the part that most of us struggle with and hide from.

The comedian Flip Wilson was once asked about his religion;
And he said, "When I was a child, I was a Jehovah's Witness";
And what are you now, the interviewer wanted to know,
Well now, he said, "I'm more of a Jehovah's bystander."

Most of us struggle with the thought of telling others about our faith
Because it conjures up images of standing out on Route 30 with a John 3:16 sign
Or of walking up to strangers and telling them about the faith
And the hope and the power we've come to know
In our experience of God's real presence.

Telling others about our faith may involve that kind of public witness,
But it's more likely that your witness to Christ's love and presence in your life
Will begin here as you participate in the church's life;
When you use your gifts to build that community of God's heart
That little girl experienced in North Carolina.

It's much more likely that you'll be a witness in your family and among your friends;
But when someone at school or work or at the gym asks about your weekend plans
Tell them that you're going to church or participating through the livestream on Sunday
And you'd love for them to come some time, too, and then let God do the rest;
With some added help from our professional Christian witnesses.

The public part of being a witness is always connected to the private part;
The more time you and I spend with God,
The more likely the quality of our lives will reflect the love of God
And the more comfortable we'll be in expressing our faith.

A friend of mine reminded me this week that talking about her faith
Actually helps her grow in her faith
That talking about her faith with others helps her to work out what she believes
And to remember how great God has been in her life.

And, as St. Francis once said, preach the Gospel, use words if you have to.

You are Witnesses

You are witnesses – you;
So today, as we continue celebrate the resurrection and this great mission we're on;
Let me to invite you to open your life to the power and presence of God
Here at St. David's and in your daily prayers;
And then allow that power to use you and lead you
To make Christ known to others and for others.
Because you are His witnesses. Amen.