

Easter III B
April 15, 2018

Grace Church, Lexington
Fr. James

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

TELLING AND RETELLING

When in 2010 I departed for Oregon on a bicycle, a friend in my parish at the time, put up a map of the United States and plugged in pins to represent every campground and stop on the journey. That map is a good map. In fact, when I came back and saw it, I was amazed at the route, because all of the maps I had used had been small ones, covering only each day's journey. Maps are wonderful creatures. In fact I had followed maps for years in drives across the U.S. I grew up in the East and went to seminary in California, so I have been across these United States many time through the years. But cars are like maps, they give you a very distorted view of the topography. Until I rode the bicycle across I had no idea there were so many mountains in the U.S. They were in every state we rode through with the exception of Kansas. Can you believe that? It was very difficult for me to assess.

The Scriptures are like that. We read them. We even study them, but until we put them into practice, we have no idea what they entail. When Jesus first appeared to the disciples in Luke's account read today, the disciples thought he must be a ghost, because they knew that he had died. But he invited them to touch him, feed him, study with him, and in the due course of their experience they learn that he was after all not dead, but alive. Until you and I start walking the Christian walk, not just talking it, as has been said many times, we don't recognize what Christian terrain is really like. For example in vs. 47 we see that repentance and forgiveness is to be experienced and proclaimed. Have you repented and known your sins to be forgiven, and not just read about it?

South Africa is a marvelous example of a nation that decided to implement repentance and forgiveness. They called it truth-telling and amnesty, or Truth and Reconciliation, but it was based on the Christian Scriptures through the clear moral vision of Bp. Tutu. Anyone who committed a criminal act during the apartheid years in South Africa was eligible to come before the

Commission, and under cross examination give the details of their crime or crimes and be given amnesty. But to receive forgiveness they had to publicly testify to all that they had done. They had to come clean on the record. They had to be heard publicly. And then after the world knew the dastardly things they had done they were simply forgiven, free to go and pursue their lives. All of this in a twentieth century contemporary nation. I still find it hard to believe. Where do you think Bp. Tutu found such a model? This is the only time I can think of in my lifetime, when a government openly modeled itself on the teaching of Jesus. And it worked! Amazing. No, not amazing. Just amazing that they did it. And you know, it will work for you and me, just as well, but we must put it on the record. We too must repent before receiving forgiveness. Grace is not cheap.

Why did Jesus come back and meet with the disciples over an extended period of time following his resurrection? Resurrection was as sure for him whether or not he told anyone! Granted it would not have convinced anyone else, so we can be confident that he appeared to many to convince them of his new

life, and that he was substantially the same person they had walked with and lived with for the previous three years.

At the end of 2008, Wells Fargo Bank bought Wachovia bank for 15 billion dollars, creating the largest chain of bank stores in the U.S. In Amherst, at least, after several years of preparation, the Wachovia signs came down and the Wells Fargo signs went up. Why so much preparation? It was so that we would all understand that the name change did not mean a completely new bank, but one with substantial differences, not the last of which was its name. So it was with Jesus. He was and is connected viscerally, physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually with Jesus before his crucifixion, but he is also new, created anew, and his life is new, resurrection life is not pre-resurrection life. It has new qualities, new promise, new hope and in spite of what the Romans and the Jewish high priesthood did to him, regardless of all of the powers of evil in the universe, he lives. They tried and succeeded in silencing him by killing him, and guess what? He lives, and because he lives you may live too. And your

resurrection life, following repentance and forgiveness, may resemble, but will not be at all like it was before. Everything changes from the inside out. And for you to experience that doesn't require speaking about it, but it matters as much for you as it did for Jesus that you do share it with others.

A Civil War chaplain approached a wounded soldier on the battlefield and asked if he'd like to hear a few verses from the Bible. The wounded man said, "No, I'm so thirsty, I'd rather have some water." The chaplain gave him a drink, and then repeated his question. "No sir, not now – but could you put something under my head?" The chaplain did so, and again repeated his question. "No," said the soldier, "I'm cold. Could you cover me up?" The chaplain took off his inside coat and wrapped the soldier. Afraid to ask, he did not repeat his question. He made to go away, but the soldier called him back. "Look, Chaplain, if there's anything in that book of yours that makes a person do for another what you've done for me, then I want to hear it." Carlos Wilton, via PresbyNet, "Sermonshop 04 17 1994," #5, 4/12/94

John Gardner, Former Secretary of Health, Education & Welfare, once said something very wise. He said, "In the absence of criticism every organization ends up being managed for the benefit of the people who run it: most schools tend to be run in such a way as to serve the purposes of the teachers; the Navy tends to be run for the benefit of naval officers; the vested interests of postal employees are the predominant factor in controlling and directing the future of the post office; the policies and practices of most universities are explicable chiefly in terms of the vested interests of the professors." If that is true about schools, military services and bureaucracies, it is also true of the church. When we are at our worst, we are under the delusion that the church exists for our benefit rather than for the world. King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com

When we are at our worst, we worry about our survival, our financial stability, our business-like practices, ourselves. I'm only going to say this once. If Grace Church disappears this afternoon, that is, this building, the organization, the little bit of money that we give to it, tomorrow as few as two

or three of us can gather together in prayer, with works of mercy and the presence of Jesus Christ, and the Church of Jesus Christ will go right on without a hitch. We speak of how wonderful Grace Church is; let me tell you, Grace Church the building, Grace Church the organization, is completely dispensable. *We*, when we have been brought into resurrection life through repentance and forgiveness will never, can never be dispensable again.

Jesus tells his disciples and he tells us that we are witnesses of these things. What are 'these things.' The resurrection for one. The teachings of the scriptures and Jesus interpretation of them for a second, and how are our lives changed as we became active witnesses. For you see a witness is one who testifies publicly of what he has seen and heard, what she has experienced. And historically witnesses have often given their lives for those things. In fact, Christians always have given their lives as their witness. It is not happenstance, of course, that the word for witness is also the word for 'martyr.' For the Christian 'witness' means the same

thing. If we give our lives as a witness to the love and power of Jesus Christ in our lives living that way until we die, however we die, it is exactly the same thing.

Randolph Riggs told this story. During her spring break from her first year of school, I took Emma, my granddaughter, on her first trip to Washington, D.C. On our first night in Washington, we went to see the Lincoln Memorial and the Viet Nam War Memorial. I am always humbled by both of them.

That evening, as we walked along the wall with all the names on it, Emma kept asking questions. Usually, as you walk down the path to the apex of the wall, there is a hush that falls. However, Emma wasn't into the hush. She needed answers to her questions: "Dad-Dad (my grandfather name), why are all these names on this wall?" "Dad-Dad, why did they have to die?" "Dad-Dad, why is it so important to remember their death?"

There was a Vietnam Vet visiting the memorial that night who overheard her questions. He called us over and gave us his

answer. He said, "Honey, I fought with these men in a war a long way away, and when I came home I found people wanted to forget what many of us had done. They built this wall as a reminder to all of us that there were men and women who gave their lives for their country."

Then he turned to the wall and began to trace one name in particular, "This man right here gave his life for me. He gave his life for me." It was hard for that man to get his heart and mind around the sacrifice of his friend, so he keeps telling the story over and over again, and each time he tells it, he understands a little more.

We have that problem, too. There is, of course, someone who gave his life for us. However, we need to make sense of that story, so we tell it over and over again. Ours is a faith rooted in the writings of the Holy Scriptures, so we look at it in light of what we know of the promise of the Messiah in the Old Testament. We read the disciples eye witness accounts in the Gospels. We examine it from the perspective of the epistles; the early writings of the church. We think about it in light of

what other men and women of faith have said in a different time and place through the study of theology. We tell our own stories and listen to the testimonies of others so the story won't grow cold for us.

We listen to the story and we tell the story over and over again from different perspectives so we can understand the depth and breadth of God's love for us. Randolph T. Riggs, *When Faith Is Not Enough* *Yes.*