

Building A Church—Part 1  
 “We Are Witnesses”  
 Easter #B-18  
 Acts 3: 12-19  
 Luke 24: 36b-48  
 April 13, 2018  
 Rev. Rob Carter

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Some may recall a little tidbit about Luke and Acts from a sermon series I offered last year. Their titles seem to belie it, but they're written by the same author. The Book of Acts is essentially the sequel to Luke's Gospel—two parts of the same story.

In Luke, we get the story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. Luke tells us how *Jesus* revealed the kingdom of God in this world.

Acts, on the other hand, tells us what happened after Jesus left this world and ascended to heaven. It's the story of, “Okay... now what?”

“Well... okay... Jesus is alive, but no longer here. Now what? Now what in the world should we do?”

And as we'll explore for the next few weeks, the answer to their question is found in the formation of the Church. The Church is what the disciples do.

Except, no one ever intentionally set out to create the Church. Not once did one of the disciples say, “Hey... I know. We'll build the Church.”

Rather, Acts tells us that the Church was really just a byproduct of what the first followers did after Christ departed. The Church was a very unintentional consequence of what they were doing... as a movement of just a few grew into a movement of the thousands as people began witnessing the new life of Jesus' followers.

In truth, Acts is an amazing testimony to those first followers. One we really need to hear. For when the Gospel of Luke leaves off, those very disciples still have yet to get their acts together—no pun intended.

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In fact, as we approach our Lukan lesson today, it's important to remember the pathetic state in which the disciples found themselves. Just three days ago... their rabbi, their teacher, the one they called Messiah was killed. They had left everything they'd known to follow this guy as he traveled around Galilee revealing the kingdom of God in what he said and what he did. They had witnessed him interpret Scripture and the richness of their Jewish tradition. They'd witnessed him heal the sick and tend to the troubled. They'd witnessed him tear down society's dividing walls and hierarchies. And they'd witnessed him go toe to toe with the authorities of his day in order to combat the ways of our world with the ways of God's kingdom.

They'd witnessed it all—including his death at the hands of those authorities. But now the one they believed would redeem the world had been killed by it.

Certainly... Jesus had tried to warn them. He'd warned them he'd be betrayed and handed over to the Romans to be crucified. And he told them how, after three days, he'd rise from the dead. Living—in the flesh!

But we all know there's really no preparing anyone for something like this, right?

So Luke makes clear, when the resurrected Jesus suddenly appears before his disciples, they're terrified. They think he's a ghost. So Jesus points to his hands and feet and invites them to touch his skin and bones. And if that wasn't enough, he asks for something to eat—something to chew and swallow to demonstrate just how real new life really is.

So the disciples hurry up and cook the man some fish as this radical new reality begins to set in. And while Jesus eats, they gather round as joy and peace begin to eclipse their fear.

It's beautifully, really. The posse's back together again. Except... Jesus is there for just short time... with a specific purpose.

Luke says Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures," and reminded them about all they'd experienced together. The lessons, the miracles. The sacrifices, the love. The death, the resurrection. He reminds them about it all before offering one final charge.

"You are witnesses of the things." "You are all witnesses to these things!"

"For you know my love. You've experienced my grace.

"You've uncovered the truth in Scripture.

"You've walked with God.

"You've beheld who humanity is created to be.

"You know that God is present even amid your greatest fears and deepest pains.

"And now as I stand before you, resurrected in the flesh, you know that God has a plan for redeeming this world that nothing can prevent.

"You have seen it. You've heard it. You've felt it. You've experienced it all!

"You are witnesses to these things." Jesus says.

"You are all witnesses to the kingdom of God!"

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These are essentially the last words Luke records Jesus saying in his Gospel. For the next thing we know, Jesus offers them one final blessing... and then ascends into heaven.

And that's where Luke Part 1 ends and Luke Part 2 (better known as Acts) picks up. With Jesus having just reminded his disciples of all they'd come to experience... and reminding them of who they are—"witnesses" to the kingdom of God.

Scholars note he doesn't say they *will be* witnesses. He doesn't ask them to please be his witnesses. No. He says it as a matter of identity—"You *are* witnesses."

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It's a mighty powerful segue from the story of Jesus to the story of his followers, don't you think?

After all, what is a witness? What does a witness do?

Witnesses *testify*, right? They offer their *testimony*. They tell others what they've seen... what they've heard... what they know to be true.

Jesus didn't spell it out as clearly as he could've. But make no mistake. He paved the way for his followers.

“So now what? Now that I'm raised... Once I ascend to heaven... what do you do???

You are witnesses. You tell the story. You reveal the love and grace you've come to know. You speak the truth as you've experienced it. You testify to the kingdom of God at work in this world!”

Which is exactly what those first followers did. They went out and shared the truth as they'd experienced. Without any grand plan. Without forming a single long-range planning committee to develop a strategic vision for the future. No. They simply went out started telling the story of God's kingdom by the way they treated others... and the stories they told.

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It's exactly what Peter does in our first lesson this morning. Right before that story picks up, he was tending to a crippled beggar who was at the great Jerusalem temple—not because he had to, but because he knew amid life in God's kingdom, you care for the sick and the hurting. So Peter reached out and healed the man. And suddenly, Acts says a throng of people gathered around Peter amazed at what he'd done.

But in the speech we read, Peter makes clear, the healing wasn't about him. It's about the kingdom of God in Christ. He tells the throngs of people the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. He tells them that everything he and Jesus' followers do, they do in the name of Jesus, who came to heal the sick and mend the broken... who came to tear down society's dividing walls and hierarchies... who came to confront the authorities of the day with the ways of God's kingdom.

And with that, the kingdom grew. More and more people began uncovering the kingdom of God for themselves. More and more people began uncovering the love God has for the them... the grace God gives to them... the new way of life God offers to them. Because Jesus' followers began giving witness to their faith by the stories they shared AND the lives they lived. And a movement that began with Jesus and 12 disciples grew from a few dozen to a few hundred to a few thousand in the blink of an eye. Because those who followed Christ determined the story of their lives needed to reflect the story they'd witnessed in Jesus Christ.

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Do you see where this is going? A sermon-series called “Building a Church.” A sermon titled “We Are Witnesses”? If you're squirming... it's probably because you're right—it's coming home.

For I know that the words witnessing and testimony aren't comfortable words amid our tradition right now. To be sure, for over half a century, the greater Protestant tradition of which we Presbyterians are a part, has run away from things like testimony. We've been taught it's not polite to talk about our faith with others. Like the topics of money and sex, we tend to think of faith as a put-off in social circles. Faith can be spoken at church... not at the ballpark. We can talk about faith in our small groups... but not with our neighbors. Maybe with close friends, but certainly not the office break-room.

And as a result, for over half a century now the Protestant church has been losing its voice in society. We essentially just abdicated it because we were nervous about coming on too strong... or seeming too judgmental. We understood nobody likes the zealot knocking on your door, so we took our reluctance to the extreme and stopped speaking out and giving witness to our faith in a God who cares for creation... who embraces the outcast... who welcomes the immigrant... who tends to the hurting. We stopped testifying to the light that leads our way even when the rest of the world is hunkering down in fear and building up dividing walls. And as a result, as a result of our silence... two things happened in both church and society.

First... amid our silence, society only heard from a few of the very loudest voices of the Church. And all of Christianity became associated with those loud voices... coming from the likes of the Moral Majority. And our beautifully inclusive faith became associated with judgement and condemnation and exclusion. That's the first thing that happened.

The second consequence was that we Protestants began losing sight of exactly who Jesus says we are. Witnesses. Witnesses to the kingdom of God. Witnesses to the beautifully inclusive and abundant love God has for each and for all. Doesn't matter if you don't want to be a witness, according to Jesus . He's already made it clear. You are. We all are!

Because, when you get right down to it, friends... if not us, then who? If we're not going to be the ones showing and telling others the story of God's love in Jesus Christ... If we're not the ones testifying to hope even in the midst of fearful times... If we're not the ones challenging the ills of current systems that rob people of dignity and justice... If we're not the ones proclaiming that the last and the least should be first... If we're not the ones testifying to the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven... then how will others come to know it? How will others come to experience it? Point blank... how in the world can we possibly participate in the movement that is God's kingdom if we don't talk about it with those who have yet to uncover its inclusive embrace?

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The good news is that it's not too late. In fact, this just may be the perfect time. One, because it's never too late according to God's time. And two... because you're here... and *you* have a story to tell. You may not know it, but you have one... Probably lots of 'em. Stories about your experiences of God. Or questions you might have. Stories about love given or received... stories about struggles overcome or peace in times of hardship... stories about forgiveness when it wasn't deserved... about the joy of generosity... about the blessing of being a blessing.

It's not a one-size-fits-all. Frankly, no story is exactly the same. Rather, testimony is simply sharing something about your relationship with God from your personal perspective.

As the Book of Acts reveals... it's the "Now What?" of our faith. And it is enough... it is more than enough to revitalize the very movement that started it all and changed the world.

So I share we are endeavoring something a bit new in our worship—because it is something essential to the way of life of life for disciples. Testimony. Sharing a story of how someone has experienced and lived into God's kingdom in the here and now. So once a month, a member of our congregation will offer a very generous gift in the expression of a testimony in worship, sharing a time of how they've experienced or lived into God's kingdom in the here and

now. Patty O'Brien so beautifully shared one last month. This morning, Alison Peer is offering one. These stories are how faith gets shared... how love gets expressed... and how movements take off.

Alison...

### **Alison Peer**

#### **Testimony**

April 15, 2018 – Easter 3B

Good morning. After being asked to give a testimony today, I started pondering what I wanted to share with you about my faith and about how I see God working in my life. While I was on the phone with my mom the other day for our morning coffee chat, I told her that I was asked to give a testimony and I wasn't quite sure what I should talk about. She immediately asked me if I remembered what I did when I was six years old at my grandmother's funeral. I don't remember much about that day, except that I had never seen a body in a casket before. My mom reminded me that on the day of my grandmother's funeral there were crowds of people throughout the funeral home and they were all crying. Apparently, I walked around with a box of tissues handing them out to the adults and proclaiming that they shouldn't be crying because my grandma was with Jesus in heaven. Apparently, from a young age, I had an understanding and belief in salvation and was giving light to those who were struggling.

I've watched God work in and through me in many moments and experiences since then. On April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech, which had been my home for almost 8 years, experienced one of the most horrific tragedies that this country has seen when 32 people were killed. At the time I was finishing up graduate school and was supervising two residence halls on the campus. On my little staff of 8, one was killed in the French class, another jumped from a 2nd story window before the shooter entered his class, and yet another was a first responder on the rescue squad. To say I was stunned and incapable of making sense of what was happening is an understatement. That day and the weeks to follow were like watching somewhat of a miracle take place before my eyes.

Being geographically located in the New River Valley of south west Virginia, Blacksburg is somewhat of a weird weather place. The wind can whip through the valley and literally steal your breath from you as you try to walk. The day of the shooting felt like a mid-winters day, not a mid-April day.

It was cold, windy, and dark, with snow blowing in the air. As the word spread about the tragedy that day, students began to leave campus. By 10pm that night, when the death of my staff member, Caitlin Hammaren, was confirmed, campus was nearly empty as I walked through the cold to meet Caitlin's grieving parents. To me, the air seemed to match the feeling inside all of us; confused, empty, cold, void of anything life giving. I remember waking up the next morning to a phone call from a longtime family friend who reminded me that God put me in that place because I was called to be a light where there was none. I'm not sure I agreed in that moment. Doing things like taking parents to choose the final outfit their daughter would wear was not something I ever thought I would have to do. But somehow, God gave me the strength to be there, be present, and care for others at their lowest moment.

As the week moved on and the campus grieved the loss of our 32 and our sense of safety, things began to happen that showed God's presence almost everywhere. Memorials were erected, candlelight vigils were planned that thousands attended, funerals took place, and we received more gifts and sentiments from around the world than could even be tracked. It was overwhelming. Our community came together in a way that I have never experienced. And over the course of a week, as our community reclaimed what was ours, the weather turned from the dead of winter, to bright, warm sunshine. God was there. It was amazing.

Mid-April is and always will be a reflective time for me. It's a time for me to be reminded how God shows up in each of us, to give light in dark places. And no matter our age, no matter who we are, no matter our method, we can do this for others.