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 First Presbyterian Church of Athens
 Second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2020
 Text: Acts 1:1-11, Psalm 40:1-5

You Will Be My Witnesses

Introduction to Scripture Reading

Since Christmas, we've been reading the Gospel written by Mark, but as we heard last Sunday, it ended abruptly with an empty tomb. Another Gospel writer, however, the one named Luke, wrote a sequel to his Gospel. That book we call "The Acts of the Apostles," (i.e. "The Book of Acts" or simply "Acts."). It appears in our Bibles after the four gospels. In the opening line of Acts, Luke addresses his reader, someone he calls Theophilus. Theophilus translated means "lover of God." Whether this is an historical person or anyone who loves God is unclear.

Listen now to God's word as it comes to us in the first 11 verses of Acts as Luke picks up his post-Easter story of Jesus: *Acts 1:1-11*. This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Sermon

An eight-year old boy named Samuel is travelling with his newly widowed mother Rachel to go visit relatives. The pair wait patiently for their next train amid the hustle and bustle of Philadelphia's 30th Street station.

Samuel ventures to the men's room alone. From inside his stall, with the door barely ajar, he sees three men enter the otherwise empty room. While one man washes his face at the sink, another grabs him from behind and the third slits his throat. Samuel gasps. Hearing the noise, the murderer pulls out a gun and one by one throws open the stall doors. Samuel manages to lock his door. When the murderer comes to his stall, the door rattles and shakes with the man's tugs and shoves. And just as the murderer kicks it in, Samuel escapes under the partition to the adjacent stall.

From this point on in the 1985 movie, "Witness" Samuel's life is in danger as he is a material witness to a homicide.

"You will be my witnesses," Jesus tells his disciples. He's with them at their old haunt, on the Mount of Olives. It's been forty days since the terrified women had discovered the empty tomb and breathlessly told their "idle tale," as the other disciples had called it. But during these 40 days, the male disciples had had their own first-hand experience and were no longer discounting the women's testimony. They had seen and heard for themselves the resurrected Jesus walking, talking, eating, teaching—weird, mysterious glimpses of something beyond their

imagining, experiences that were counter to any logic they knew yet which strangely warmed their hearts and vindicated their despair.

But Jesus must go now. Here on the high point overlooking the city of Jerusalem under the shade of the ancient olive trees, he now prepares his friends for his final departure, which is imminent.

“You will be my witnesses,” he tells them.

A witness is someone who has seen or heard something. A witness knows something and is called to give a statement. It’s not a job you volunteer for. As in little Samuel’s case, being a witness can be dangerous. It has the potential to cost you dearly, perhaps even your life.

“You will be my witnesses.” I’m not sure that this is what the disciples wanted to hear.

“When he’s gone for good and not popping in anymore,” they thought, “when these 40 days fade like a dream, will we really claim this rabbi--who was dead--came back to life? If we do, we’ll surely be ridiculed? Might we even end up like him, persecuted and nailed to a Roman cross as an insurrectionist?”

The Greek word for “witnesses” is *marturios*, i. e. martyrs. The years before Constantine are referred to as the “Age of the Martyrs.” Even today, there are places where Christians face terrible hardships on account of their faith and sometimes even death.

The boy Samuel and his mother are Amish. Wearing his broadbrimmed hat, dark little homemade suit with short pants and lace up boots, the boy is questioned by a cop named John Book, played by Harrison Ford. After it becomes clear they all are in danger, Book returns Samuel and Rachel to their farming community in the Pennsylvania countryside. For several weeks, Book hides out there to avoid the bad guys who are seeking to kill him and his witness. He must blend in so as not to attract notice.

The Amish way of life is quite alien to the cop. They dress differently--with dark, old-fashioned clothes; they speak differently—a lot of German; they live differently--simply, even primitively, without electricity, gasoline-powered motors, or modern medicine. They help one another—the whole community pitches in for a barn raising. And perhaps most strikingly different of all to this inner-city cop whose world is permeated with violence, the Amish are pacifists.

In one scene Book has ridden to town in a horse and buggy with some of the other men. Tourists gape like they are freaks. One teenage boy taunts one of the Amish men, daubing his face with a melting ice cream cone, daring him to fight. Book witnesses the man’s remarkable restraint. Of course, being Harrison Ford, you know he can’t sit by and watch this humiliation but for so long, so he beats up the teenager, an act which gives away his identity and leads to the movie’s climax.

The lifestyle and actions of the Amish give the movie’s title, “Witness” another dimension. Their lifestyle and actions, you see, bear witness to their deep Christian faith. They have heard Jesus say, “turn the other cheek, forgive your debtors, pray for those who persecute you, love your enemies.” They know an alternative way to live. Their lives are a testimony.

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“You will be my witnesses,” Jesus told his little band of followers. And they were. Christian communities spread throughout the Roman Empire, sprouting up like dandelions. They attracted followers because their way of life was different.

A terrible plague devastated Western civilization in the third century. At its peak, five thousand a day were said to die in Rome. While everyone else emphasized self-preservation—even throwing sick family members into the road before they were dead--Christians emphasized fearless altruism. The bishop of Alexandria wrote that Christians “took charge of the sick, attending to their every need, and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.”¹

Thank Goodness, we have better science nowadays! Those who observed the compassionate Christian response to the sick and suffering were impressed. As the refrain to that old camp song goes, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love; Yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”?

In the final scene of the movie the bad guys—who turn out to be the corrupt police chief and his two henchmen—arrive at the Amish farm where Book has been living incognito. The climactic confrontation occurs between Book and the police chief, each wielding a gun. When he fears he is about to be bested, the crazed police chief takes Rachel hostage and points his pistol at her head. Book drops his shotgun, raises his arms, and begins to talk his boss down from the crime he is poised to commit. Meanwhile, little Samuel runs and rings the bell, sounding an alarm to the entire community. The Amish farmers appear from all directions. They have no weapons. They simply come. They surround Book and Rachel and the chief, and watch in silence. The chief soon realizes that there are too many witnesses--too many witnesses for him to get away with either murder or false arrest. He drops his gun and collapses in defeat.

“You will be my witnesses,” Jesus said to his followers. Did you notice that he didn’t tell them individually? He told them, “when they had come together” (verse 6). There’s something important about being together and being community. It is not accidental that the Amish live in a tight-knit society. It is in community that faith is lived out and becomes a witness to the kingdom of God which Jesus preached. That’s why this social distancing is so hard for us as a church. We miss our community. Thank Goodness for cyber technology, or we would really feel separated.

Along with his declaration that his disciples will become witnesses, Jesus made a promise. And this promise is really the key to it all: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” Those are plural yous. In the next chapter of Acts, on the day of

Pentecost *when they were all together*, the Holy Spirit did come. It came upon the group, and we say that the church was born. Since that day, the church has been empowered to be a witness. The Spirit has given the church courage to proclaim the gospel, braving ridicule and danger, going against the cultural grain, and standing in solidarity as a moral compass when our leaders go astray.

Church you are Jesus' witnesses. And the Holy Spirit working in and among you will be the wind in your sails.

So , go out into the world in peace.

Have courage.

Hold on to what is good.

Return no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the faint-hearted.

Support the weak.

Help the suffering.

Honor all people.

Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



ⁱ Moses Y. Lee, "What the Early Church Can Teach Us About the Coronavirus," in <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-early-church-teach-coronavirus/> on 4/17/20