

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at  
Clarence Presbyterian Church on April 14, 2024.**

**WITNESSES**

*<Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4:1-8; Luke 24:36b-48>*

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

This past week we were privileged to witness a miracle of the natural world and the heavens. This generational event united us not only with one another, but connected us with thousands upon thousands of people not only around our country but in other countries as well. While people across the country might only have been able to experience part of this event, here in Western New York, we were able to bear witness it in the fullest degree possible. Unless, of course, those precious few minutes were defined by cloud cover in your viewing area, which seemed to be, at least, the northtowns of Buffalo.

In the days that followed the eclipse, many of us were able to joyously see pictures of the totality event, even if we couldn't witness it with our own eyes. And even with cloud cover, we experienced the rapid darkness which occurred and the drop in temperature attendant to the total blocking of the sun's rays. It was surreal, and truly an experience to be appreciated. But it has me, now, asking a curious question of myself: how would I describe this event to someone who had no background knowledge of the event? How would I share with someone an accounting of my experience, especially if that person had no prior experience on which to compare it? It may be one of those questions of idle curiosity, but the way in which I, or any of us, might answer bears greatly upon another dynamic that is much closer to home in our lives of faith:

We are witnesses to the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. As Pope John Paul II put it once, "we are an Easter people, and alleluia is our song." How, then, shall we witness? How shall we describe this experience, and what it means, to others? We are witnesses, and we are called upon to bear witness as an Easter people to the dynamic reality of the resurrection.

And this dynamic reality comes with a two-fold understanding.

First is the understanding that this is no small thing, no minor calling, and certainly nothing to take lightly. This is the gospel of life we are entrusted with! At the same time, it is nothing to take too seriously, either; this calling is meant to be one of joy and celebration, of awe and appreciation for the world and the world to come. We are to engage this calling with all of who we are, and to do so at all times with the fullest joy of life!

We are joyful witnesses because Easter itself, the miracle and joy of the resurrection, is not a one-time event. It may be an event that occurred once, but it is not finished occurring. In Luke and Acts - which are understood to be written by the same author as

two parts to one story - the verb for resurrection is used in the aorist tense, meaning that it is an action that has occurred and is still occurring in an ongoing reality. While the resurrection of Jesus happened at one point, the reality and impact of the resurrection is still at work today.

As such, we are still in the midst of proclaiming the news of the resurrection, of bearing witness to it in all aspects of daily living. When we celebrate the life of a loved one, the life of a member of this church and community, we are bearing witness to the resurrection, as well. When we welcome new life, either into the world or into this communion of the church, we are bearing witness to the call of proclamation and community. As we awake each day, we bear witness once again to all that we shall encounter and do within that day, familiar and new alike.

And if we are to tackle the question of “how do we describe such an event?” to others, or even to ourselves, then we do well to begin with remembering that we do so not just of our own efforts alone but of all those who have borne witness to the resurrection in the fullness of the Spirit of God.

In our reading from Acts this morning, Peter paves the way for this. For us, two thousand-some years after the reality of the resurrection, it is easy to assign such weight to the task of proclamation and bearing witness that it becomes daunting and overwhelming, as if it all depends solely on our capability - or lack thereof - to convince and convert. As weighty as the matter is, that is not our responsibility. Our responsibility, rather, is to simply bear witness to the news, to the experience that we have.

Peter offered nothing more than his experience. It was not a perfect experience - he denied Jesus three times and hid away during the crucifixion itself - but it was his, and it was what he offered. Nor did he offer it to those gathered from a position of being outside the group. Even as he commented to the gathered crowd that they acted in ignorance and a lack of understanding, he did not claim that he was above them in this. He shares his experience as one of them, as one who has acted with a lack of understanding.

And herein lies the key to the first understanding: we offer our witness to others from a place of needing such a witness ourselves. A preaching professor once told my class that the sermon ought to speak as much to the preacher as it does to the congregation, otherwise it is superficial and shallow, and the good news of the gospel is anything but superficial or shallow. It is no minor thing to bear witness to the resurrection, and it could feel overwhelming if viewed from the wrong angle. But when we remember that we need these words in our own lives as much as others might need them in theirs...then we truly begin to share an authentic faith, a story that has merit, and a witness that can change lives.

Which leads us to the second understanding elicited by the dynamic reality of “we are an Easter people and alleluia is our song”: Such a calling does not ask us to suspend the messiness of our lives, the doubts and questions with which we wrestle, or to pretend that everything is fine when it isn’t.

In our reading from Luke, it is easy to imagine and realize that the disciples are struggling to understand what they are experiencing. The gospel uses the word “doubt,” but such a simple word hardly conveys so simple a meaning.

“Doubt,” here, is used to express something more complicated than simple disbelief or refusal to believe. Here, it also reflects the internal dialogue of making sense of what your senses are actually showing you. Much like trying to make sense of the world around us turning completely dark at 3:18 in the afternoon - a time when it is normally not supposed to do that - the minds of the disciples are trying to reconcile the difference between what is understood about the natural order of the world and what is empirically in front of their eyes. They’re also trying to fit into the equation the information the other disciples, recently returned from Emmaus, have brought to them.

Again, it is messy, and again, it is meaningful to bear witness to what *you have experienced*. I would be willing to guess that all of us, at one time or another, have had an experience that is profoundly meaningful and also not at all easy to explain with any reason or rationale, and that at such a time as we try to express such an experience we are ultimately asking the other person to come along for the ride. It may even be that you’ve felt frustrated by seeming lack of ability to explain to someone else in words that which feels like it makes so much sense in your heart.

But our frustration or inability is nothing in comparison to what we bear witness to. Even the deepest struggles of our living cannot stand in the light of the resurrection. “Easter gives us no exemption - nor should we want one - from the struggles of life in the wake of resurrection living. Hope, joy, life, love - they all come to us in the deepest way in the death and resurrection of Jesus. They are a real place with real meaning for us”<sup>\*</sup> and we bear witness to this. Even in our messy, trying-to-reconcile, doubting and uncertain lives, we bear witness to this, for “we are an Easter people, and alleluia is our song.”

You’ll notice that, ultimately, I have not given any concrete format or template on how to bear witness to the resurrection. There is none, save to share your experience in the hope that it will bring hope, joy, love, and life to another person, another situation, another corner of creation. And that will be unique to each and every one of us.

In the resurrection of Jesus, we are invited to receive the gift of life abundant and life everlasting - resurrection life. In return, as we bear witness, we offer our gift, unique and particular, bringing joy into the world and into the lives of those around us. What a gift, indeed. Amen.

<sup>\*</sup>Rev. Mark Ramsey, Executive Director of The Ministry Collaborative. “Leave the Struggle In There,” [www.mministry.org](http://www.mministry.org), April 9, 2024.