

Witnesses to the Resurrection

By Matt Gaventa

I.

One Sunday awhile ago, a pastor I used to know stepped into the pulpit of a church I used to know. Let's call him Larry. Let's call the church Trinity. The names don't really matter—this is just one of those stories. Larry stepped into the pulpit one Sunday, right after the Old Testament reading, right after the Epistle reading, right after the Anthem—right at that moment of the liturgy where Larry was to open up to the lectionary Gospel, read the selection, and then preach. But, on this particular Sunday, Larry simply forgot. Instead of reading the appointed pericope, he went right into his homily, never mind the slightly perplexed looks on the faces of the more attentive members of the congregation.

These things happen, of course, all the time. I'm sure Larry heard a few jokes in the receiving line, all smiles. But the next week, when Larry stepped into the pulpit, right after the Old Testament reading, right after the Epistle reading, right after the Anthem. Well, he did it again. He went right into his sermon again, ignoring again whatever little bit of Luke or Matthew was scheduled for the day. Our minds play tricks on us. We form new habits so quickly. Larry never had anything but the best intentions. Nevertheless, Trinity Church had now gone two Sundays without the gospel lesson, and the jokes get just a bit more pointed. The people know how this is supposed to go, and they know when it's not going the way it's supposed to go, and I can only imagine the exchanges in the receiving line after one more time of missing the beat.

So, the next Sunday. Larry steps into the pulpit, looks out onto the sea of the congregation, takes a breath—and in that breath, the choir, sitting as usual in the rear balcony of this small country church, unfolds a banner down over the rear railing, like fans at the homecoming game. And before Larry can begin whatever he's about to say, he can't help but confront the helpful instruction written in large print:

“LARRY, DON'T FORGET TO READ THE GOSPEL!”

Of course, anybody can forget a stray piece of liturgy on a Sunday morning. More challenging, I suspect, is to remember some of the fundamental purposes of our liturgy in a moment in which the social pressures and challenges of ministry are infinite. We preach in a time of sequentially unprecedented events. We preach in a moment in history that feels uniquely fragile. Moreover, we preach to congregations accustomed to the secular homiletics of late-night talk show hosts and the regular pontification of social media expertise. We preach desperate to meet the prophetic expectations of one parishioner and also the spiritual needs of another while also not saying anything that might offend the ones in the back pew.

This is all well-rehearsed stuff, to be sure. It's not news to observe that for myself, and for many of the preachers I know, the pulpit today feels like a high-wire act, requiring Olympian levels of concentration to thread some impossible needle. No wonder one might forget to read the Gospel. My hope, however, is that, despite the moment, we might remember also to preach it. It seems to me that the more complicated the preaching task becomes, the more urgently we need remember its basic motions and its basic purposes: no matter the headlines, no matter the crisis, no matter the polling, no matter the apocalypse of the day, in the end, Larry, don't forget to preach the Gospel.

II.

One of my favorite little corners of scripture is the story of Matthias in Acts 1:12-26. Presumably it scratches some primal Presbyterian nerve center within me that enjoys the story of order being restored to the original band of disciples: as Peter observes, in Judas's absence, there's a slot to be filled at the table lest the magic number of twelve not be maintained. The group being in general agreement: prayers are said; lots are cast among the two finalists, Matthias and Justus; and, Matthias ends up the winner, duly elected in the first committee meeting in church history (in fact I have heard this scripture read alongside a rephrasing of the familiar epitaph: "The Minutes of the Meeting / Thanks be to God.")

Of interest for the moment, however, is not the surprising intrusion of bureaucracy into the earliest moments of the church's existence—indeed, it has to start somewhere, so it shouldn't be that surprising—but rather the qualifications for and responsibilities of the job of apostle as Peter outlines it. The NRSV puts it this way: "So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection" (1:21-22).

At first glance, the thing smells like tautology. Read bluntly, Peter needs somebody who has already witnessed Jesus's resurrection ("one of the men who have accompanied us during all that time...") to become, well, a witness to the resurrection. But of course the first is a matter of historical happenstance—somebody who was in the right place at the right time—and the second a matter of present conviction. One is no guarantee of the other: just because someone may have been in the crowd with Jesus is no guarantee that they will agree to tell the story of what they saw. Witnesses refuse to testify all the time. And what Peter senses in the moment is that the job of apostle is not simply a matter of historical credential—that you must have been there, in the moment, having seen the thing yourself—but rather also of public willingness. The job needs people willing to tell the story.

In fact the willingness turns out to be far more important than the credential: by the time we get into the Pentecost story in Acts 2, Peter has expanded and spiritualized his credentialing; in the midst of his Pentecost sermon, he preaches to the

gathered and diverse crowd that “all of us are witnesses” to this risen Christ (2:32): by this point a spiritual rather than material claim, as for sure most of the people gathered in Jerusalem that day would not have themselves seen the body of the risen Lord. In other words, it doesn’t matter so much how they got here. It does matter that they’re willing to tell the story. It matters that they’re willing to witness to the resurrection. It matters that they’re willing to preach the Gospel.

III.

I regularly use the story of Matthias and Justus when training church officers. They’ve all been to committee meetings before, so there’s a kind of baked-in accessibility to the exegesis. Furthermore, there’s something holy and humbling about the moment when I point out that neither Matthias or Justus ever appear again in the New Testament: despite the seeming significance of the election, Matthias seems to have fewer Acts than the other Apostles. Our incoming officers will have been elected into a long tradition of valuable service, and will doubtlessly have their names appear in more than a few months’ worth of church minutes. But we don’t do what we do for our own legacies. We do it because it’s a calling. That seems to help the room.

But then I tell them the job description, which I believe to be fundamentally unchanged from Matthias through to the present moment: that, thanks to some committee meeting somewhere, conducted as they always are with prayers and the drawing of lots, each of them has also now been commissioned as *witnesses to the resurrection*. None of them were there for it, of course. No matter. It’s not the credentialing that means anything. It’s the willingness. You were elected, I tell them, as witnesses to the resurrection. Improbably, and in defiance of any sort of rational logic, you were elected as witnesses to an event you could not possibly have witnessed.

And then they look at me a little funny.

But the truth is that, in the Presbyterian church I serve, our governance is entirely rooted in our work as resurrection witnesses. We identify the risen Christ as head of our church. We intentionally subordinate our otherwise-democratic-seeming procedures to the will of the living Jesus. We make the audacious claim that our adherence to Robert’s Rules of Order simply gives us the best opportunity to discern the will of the risen Messiah. And so I tell my incoming officers that their role as witnesses to the resurrection compels them to a particular kind of governance: as our *Book of Order* says, we gather not to represent the will of the people but rather to discern the will of Christ. I tell them that inasmuch as they can govern with humility before the Messiah, they are in their own way witnessing to the resurrection.

I do this partially to create some distance between the work of a church officer and the work so many of my parishioners do in non-profit and corporate boards; here in a church, the agenda might look familiar, but the power flows much differently. I also do it to plant the seed for some moment inevitable in the life cycle of any particular church board—that moment in which they will become stuck wrestling with

some difficult conversation, and I will interrupt them to ask what Jesus might have them do. But, mostly, I confess, I do this as an act of care. Governing a church is difficult and heavy work. Tending to the wellness of a congregation in this particular moment of the church's life is no small task. The toll weighs heavy for those who sign up for ministries of governance and oversight. I need them to remember—for their own sake—that they don't have to fix it all by themselves. I need them to remember that they are not the ones in charge.

And if that's true for church committee meetings, how much more true is it for worship itself? If that's true for congregants when they show up for financial reports and facilities updates, how much more true is it when they show up for the proclamation of the Word? And if that's true for church volunteers finding their way into ministries of governance, how much more true is it for pastors and preachers? Surely we also have an obligation to preach as if Jesus himself is in charge of the sermon. Surely we also have an obligation to preach as if Jesus himself is in the chancel helping lead worship. Surely we also have an obligation to preach as witnesses to the resurrection. Surely we also have an obligation not to forget to preach the Gospel.

IV.

I worry that I have said nothing of novelty. "Preachers should talk about Jesus" does not ring of originality. But I also think there's a difference between "talking about Jesus" and "witnessing the resurrection." Frankly, it's easy to talk about Jesus when you assume he's not in the room, and we've all heard those sermons—even given a few of them. I've preached a few I wasn't happy with, even in the moment—sermons where I realized too late and too timidly that I was just wrapping Jesus's name around something I wanted to get off my chest; and, of course, in a world of constantly seismic events, punctuated by an election year of seemingly unprecedented consequence, none of us have any shortage of available topics. It is too profoundly easy to wrap our own opinions up in Jesus's name and pass them off to a congregation equally hungry to hear their own assumptions re-stated and re-justified. (Few of us are lucky enough to preach in a context where anybody might challenge our exegesis.)

But a resurrection-grounded homiletics must assume that the living Jesus is himself sitting in our pews, listening to our sermons, and working in the hearts of our hearers. It is not our job simply to put words in his mouth. It is our job rather to open up space in which he might speak for himself. To a secular audience, these sermons may sound a bit like poetry. They're going to sound open-ended, with room for questioning, doubt, worry, and provocation. They're going to ask for wonder and imagination. And for those listening with the ears of faith, these sermons are going to approach the sacred desk with humility. They're going to approach the Gospel with trepidation. They're going to stand not over but alongside the listening congregation as we jointly approach the task of grasping for whatever it is that God might want to tell us. They're going to overflow with curiosity.

And they're going to be wary of being right. After all, it's so much easier to be right when Jesus isn't in the room.

In Romans 14, Paul challenges the nascent Roman congregation not to get too excited about being right. He's responding to some argument about dietary laws, as he so regularly is; in this case, the church is gathering both folks who are keeping Jewish dietary codes and those who have forsworn them—or never adopted them in the first place. For Paul, minister to the Gentiles, there's no obvious justification for maintaining the Deuteronomic dietary restrictions. He doesn't maintain them himself, and he doesn't counsel any church to do so. He's willing to acknowledge that, in his estimation, there's a right answer and a wrong one. One might expect him therefore to counsel the more restrictive dieters in Rome to let go of their inhibition. Instead, he counsels the opposite: "If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died" (14:15).

I picture Paul writing this section over and over. Over and over, he keeps writing the opposite thing. Over and over, he keeps writing that the kosher laws are deprecated and the folks keeping kosher should just get over it. In a sense, I imagine Paul having the experience many preachers will be familiar with, which is of being stuck writing a sermon because you don't quite agree with it. A stack of crumpled papyrus lies discarded (metaphorically) at his feet. It doesn't feel faithful. It doesn't feel honest. It doesn't feel like he's written something with Jesus in the room. And then he takes a deep breath, and reconsiders. Perhaps there are more important things than being right, Paul wonders. Perhaps we should be worried about the quick step between being right and being self-righteous. Perhaps we should instead have a little humility in the presence of the God of all things.

This, I think, is what it finally means to preach the Gospel. It's not simply about remembering to include resurrection appearances in the lectionary readings, nor is it about name-dropping Easter as a matter of homiletical habit. Rather, preaching the Gospel also means preaching as if the Gospel is true—preaching as if Christ is Risen—preaching as if Christ is listening, hearing, and acting in the midst of our humble words. If that's true, then we don't have to have all the answers; we can just ask the right questions. Moreover, if that's true, we don't even have to have all the power; we can just point folks in the right direction. And finally, if that's true, we don't even have to be right in the first place. We just have to be faithful and open and humble and wondrous.

Of course, I could be wrong, thanks be to God.