

“Can I Get a Witness?”
Luke 24:44-53
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC
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Then [Jesus] said to [the disciples], “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

In the halls of New York’s Museum of Modern Art hangs one of the most iconic photos in American history. Picture this: a mother with a worry-creased forehead and worn clothing draws a hand to her face. Her eyes squint off into the distance, and she appears consumed by whatever is on her mind. That mother is flanked by two children, whose backs are to the camera, their hair tousled as though recently awoken, their small faces buried in their mother’s hunched shoulders. It’s hard to say exactly when and where the photo may have been taken just by looking at it. Though it’s in black and white, the quality is clear and the setting neutral enough to imagine its subjects might inhabit our present day.

In fact, the photo was taken in 1936, and it’s since become emblematic of the Great Depression era. Even if my description didn’t ring a bell, I bet you’d know this image if you saw it. Called *Migrant Mother*, it’s the best-known work of Dorothea Lange, who began her career as a studio photographer shooting portraits of San Francisco’s elite but quickly turned her lens toward the world around her. When in the 1930’s, hundreds of thousands of people began migrating west in search of work, Lange left her studio to document their lives. She set out into the streets to capture the plight of people who had lost almost everything, taking their pictures in labor strike and soup kitchen lines.

Before long, the Federal Resettlement Agency hired Lange to record the Dust Bowl exodus, and she began to travel along the California coastline, eventually stumbling upon a migrant workers’ camp. There, she encountered Florence Owens Thompson, the migrant mother who would become the subject of Lange’s most famous photo.

Later, Lange wrote, "I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction...She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to

tent with her children huddled around her, and [she] seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it."¹

While some of the details of Lange's account have since been disputed, the photo remains among the most indelible images of its era. Lange captured both the strength and suffering of the migrant workers who had been so hard hit by the Depression. In doing so, she shaped the nation's imagination of its past and present. She put a face to the effects of economic crisis, and she underscored the resilience of those who endured it. For all that has been written about the Great Depression in the decades since, a picture, as they say, is still worth a thousand words.

Lange became one of the first true documentary photographers, her images serving as a witness to real people's real lives. Captured by her camera lens, her subjects became larger than their own lives alone. Their stories shaped the world to which they belong. Lange liked to say that the camera could teach people "how to see without a camera." She wrote, "A good photograph is not the object; the consequences of the photograph are the objects." She went on to say that the focus shouldn't be, "how did you do it [or] where did you find it," but it should center on the reality "that such things could be."² To put it another way, a good photograph expands our understanding of what is possible. It points to a broader reality. It bears witness to the world, with all its beauty and its pain.

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What does it mean to bear witness in a world where there is both beauty and pain? That's a question I think many of us have been asking, especially this week, as we've taken in an especially heavy slate of headlines, while also navigating the endless stream of the everyday. This time, the inheritors of Dorothea Lange's legacy have captured a different set of images: children running from the building where their classmates' and teachers' lives were violently taken; memorials made to mark the 2-year anniversary of George Floyd's death; tanks rolling through hollowed-out cities in Ukraine; refugees taking shelter in basements and fleeing on trains. That's not to mention the sickness, strained relationships, and other struggles we face closer to home. It has been a heavy week, and it almost seems too much to bear.

All the while, other images continue to roll in: images of beaming graduates dressed up in their gowns; children proudly presenting themselves at spring plays and recitals; families gathering to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, or the simple gift of one another; magnolias beginning to blossom in the near-summer heat. Amid all that is hard and heavy, joy persists.

So, how do we hold the good alongside the gut wrenching, the horrible in tension with the hopeful? What does it mean to bear witness in a world where there is both beauty and pain?

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I imagine Jesus' followers were asking themselves the very same in the story we just heard. It's been weeks since Easter, though only a matter of days in the text, and today we find ourselves at the very end of Luke's gospel. The disciples have just borne witness to a breathtaking series of post-resurrection encounters at the empty tomb, on the road to Emmaus, and in the rooms where they are gathered. It seems Jesus has been showing up all over the place,

¹ <https://guides.loc.gov/migrant-mother>

² <https://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/portraits/dorothea-lange>

popping in and out of rooms with greetings of “peace be with you,” inviting his frightened friends to touch his hands and feet, and asking them for—of all things—a snack.

As Luke tells it, the disciples were “startled and terrified.” Terrified, I’m sure, that they were to go on living without their friend and teacher. Equally terrified that he might not be gone after all, for in fact, the disciples “thought that they were seeing a ghost.” They were terrified, and I imagine, also confused, as they recalled what Jesus had been saying all along and wondered how it all fit into what they were experiencing now. Amid all those feelings, I expect the disciples couldn’t help being at least a little bit hopeful, hopeful that it might not be the end after all, even if they weren’t quite sure of the alternatives.

While the disciples are still standing there, wide-eyed, Jesus begins to bring it all together. In a sweeping statement, he “opens their minds to understand,” connecting past scriptures with their present fulfillment and future implications. It’s a loaded message—that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who died and was raised so that repentance and forgiveness would be proclaimed to all nations—and the disciples have hardly begun to process it all when Jesus tasks them with bearing it forth. “You are witnesses of these things,” he tells them, but before you begin to witness, you need to wait a while for some promised aid. Then, Jesus blesses them, and just like that, he’s gone. Ascended. Withdrawn from the disciples. Carried up into heaven, as the scripture goes.

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I’ll be transparent with you here: I’ve long considered the ascension to be one of the strangest stories in the bible. Don’t ask me why, but of all the metaphysical mysteries that unfold across the pages of scripture, this one really makes me go “huh.” As a child, I imagined Jesus boarding a rocket ship and blasting up into heaven. Nowadays, I don’t have many more answers for how it all may have happened, nor do I feel I need to, and evidently, I’m not alone.

The artists who have attempted to depict this strange and wonderful scene across the centuries typically show a mass of people gathered atop some Bethany hillside, their mouths open in amazement and eyes cast upward toward what little remains of Jesus. Often, it’s only his hands, outspread in blessing, and his feet, still visibly wounded, that can be seen dangling out of the clouds into which he’s being carried away.

As bizarre a scene as it is for us to imagine now, it must have baffled those witnesses whose feet remained firmly planted on the ground. With their living Lord departed, Jesus’ friends now find themselves in a space between fear and relief, confusion and clarity, hope and doubt. They are negotiating the tensions between Jesus’ absence and his presence, between their own fledgling awareness and lingering ignorance, tasked with bearing witness to something they can barely understand. Still, their immediate response is one of praise and blessing. The story of Jesus’ ascension is one of both beauty and pain, through which the disciples are called to witness.

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So, how *do* we bear witness in a world where there is both beauty and pain? How, indeed, do we bear witness at all?

The word *witness* isn’t one we use all that often in everyday speech. Derived from the Greek, *martyrs*, the root of the word *martyr*, it’s associated with a degree of risk we rarely encounter in daily life, though it would have been familiar to the early church. Today, *witness* tends to conjure images of crime scenes, courtrooms, and signatures printed on important

paperwork. In some church traditions, *witnessing* involves the saving of souls and may even be accompanied by the distribution of fiery literature. Here at Westminster, we have a Witness and Service Committee, which oversees the outward-facing work of the church. Still, for all its uses, *witness* remains (at least in my mind) an unusual word, strangely formal and even old-fashioned to the modern tongue.

Though you might not expect it, one of the places the word *witness* transports me to is my garden. It's only since moving to Greenville that I've finally had enough room to plant a vegetable garden. Last year, it wasn't much more than a little patch where only the hardy radishes seemed to thrive. This year, I'm committed. It started back in early February, when I signed up for a class and started building a few raised beds with what little light lingered when I got home. I waited patiently until just before Tax Day to plant my first seeds, and almost every day since then, I've been watering and weeding and waiting...and waiting...and waiting...

When I go into the garden, I'm on the lookout for anything that may have changed since the day before. Sometimes, those changes come quickly; there's a sprout where there was once just soil, or a few more strawberries have ripened, or (worst case scenario) a worm that's found a feast in some of the fuller foliage. Other times, the change is so slow that I can barely perceive it, and I begin to wonder if anything is happening at all.

For the most part, the garden's transformation takes place beyond any action of my own. I may plant the seeds and water the soil with varying degrees of consistency, but at the end of the day, I can neither predict nor control when or even if the plants will produce fruit. I can't force the buds to bloom. There's something that borders on the miraculous that brings it all into being.

I may not be able to predict or control what happens in the garden, and believe me, that's a hard lesson for the latent perfectionist in me. But, if I can manage to loosen my grip, there's an incredible opportunity to participate in what is already happening there...to water and weed, to watch and wait...and wait...and wait some more...and, along the way, to witness the unfurling of life in my midst.

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Jesus says to his disciples, "You are witnesses of these things," but he doesn't leave them alone with their work. Instead, he soon follows, "And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Though the awe-struck disciples can't yet comprehend it, Jesus is promising they won't be alone in their pursuit of their call to be witnesses. They actually *can't* be alone in it but will only act by the power of the Holy Spirit, which will fill them with a higher power. Until then, Jesus charges them with sitting still and waiting for the Spirit to descend.

Much like the photographer who captures life through her lens and so shapes the world around her, we witnesses aren't tasked with writing the story ourselves. We aren't called to protect or preserve the story, any more than we are called to force it into being. Instead, we are called to pay attention to what is right in front of us—what God is doing in our midst—and to point toward it, to point toward it even when pointing seems foolish, risky, or naïve. We're called not only to point toward it, but to participate in it, to be on the lookout for ways we can join in God's work with and for the world, and to share God's love with others.

Amid life's beauty and pain, we are not alone, but empowered by the Holy Spirit so that we don't have to be God—we *can't* be—but can participate in what God is already doing through the church, even here in Greenville, in Uvalde, in Buffalo, in Minneapolis, Washington, and Ukraine. Even here, even now. God is up to something and calling us to be a part of it. There

is a blessing in this holy tension: that while it isn't all up to us, there is still plenty at stake. Our participation matters when it comes to creating a more whole and just world, so out of faithfulness to God's call, we must consider how we will join in the Spirit's movement today, this week, and in every season of our lives. "You are witnesses of these things." Bless the Lord. May it be so.