

As a quick reminder and to lay the foundation for our conversation today, this Summer we have been exploring Impossible Possibilities. The foundation is this: From creating order out of chaos, calling and caring for God’s people in the wilderness, and directing the prophets, to calling disciples, sending the Holy Spirit upon the early church, healing, and equipping the church to tell of God’s glory, God has been throughout history abundantly alive and active. Guess what? God is still abundantly alive and active. “God is not dead (*Newsboys*).” God is still doing wondrous things. God is still creating, calling, caring, directing, sending, healing, and equipping. God is still making possible what many through the ages have thought to be impossible. God is still making able what many have thought to be unable. God is still saying can when so many want to settle for can’t.

With this foundation, today we encounter the impossible possibility of bearing witness to God’s revelation and power through Jesus Christ to the world. And what better place to start than with the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples in the upper room.

Read Luke 24:36-49

“How can it be? Did you see him enter the room? He couldn’t be real?” The disciples watched Jesus be put on the cross and watched him die. It had been three days. Sure, they were told earlier on this third day that he was alive, but they hadn’t seen him yet. They had even heard Jesus tell them in his teachings that this would happen. But really, could it be? Yes!!! It could be.

Donald G. Miller (*Layman’s Bible Commentary*, 172) offers, “The resurrection of Jesus was not just a hallucination or illustration of the unseen, heavenly realities, mere word pictures of the immortality of the soul of Jesus.” Jesus was present, flesh and blood, speaking to them and eating their food.

But why? I believe it is because the disciple’s role was to bear witness to him. Jesus came to ensure the disciples that his testimony and purpose as God incarnate was real, affirming their faith in him and ensuring them their faith was worth it, and out of faith commission them to be witnesses of Christ’s revelation.

The post-resurrection appearance of Jesus was the climax of the Old Testament revelation, fulfillment of what the law, prophets, and writings had expressed. Scriptures

called forth that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in Christ's name to all nations. Victory over sin and death must be heralded to the ends of the earth. And who was it that was going to preach and bear this witness? This was the task of the church. How? Inspired by the example of Christ set before them and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Nehemiah 4:14 says, **"Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome."** (Repeat after me...) I reference this verse for two reasons. One: Isn't that what Jesus' presence served as for the disciples? Yes, I think it was a spark of inspiration for them to know that their labor in Christ's name moving forward would not be in vain, for God was with them, great and awesome in power. Two: The context of the Nehemiah proclamation provides a helpful example of God's greatness and awesomeness.

Nehemiah 4: The Israelites had a rebuilding task in front of them. They were motivated and progressing nicely on the building of a wall to protect themselves from enemies when the enemies began to cause confusion among the people, distracting them, and causing doubt in their ability to complete the task of building the wall. Nehemiah turns to the people with God's promise and says, "Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome." Let God be your motivation and focus, for God is on your side, and wants you to know victory and glory. This remembrance empowered the Israelites to forge ahead and indeed they succeeded.

At a time when they (both the Israelites and the disciples) were down, they were not out. At a time when their back was against the wall, there was still a way. At a time when the odds were stacked against them, the odds crumbled. God is not absent. God is present and active. Jesus is not dead. He is alive! He is risen! **"Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome."**

And it is to this great news that we, along with millions of others who make up God's church, are called to bear witness. Jesus' post-resurrection commission to the disciples is for us too. How might we go about fulfilling this commission? Inspired by the example of Christ set before us in the scriptures, and by the prophets and disciples before us, and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

"The Scriptures, the Church, and the Holy Spirit are a sort of trinity which together form God's weapon of impact on the world." (Donald G. Miller, LBC, 174)

Before I go any further, I want to pause and acknowledge that what "bearing witness" sounds like as "social witness" or "social justice" is indeed right. I acknowledge that the topic of "social witness (justice)" has become complex and sensitive and I acknowledge it is challenged and

debated on many levels. Does the church, defined as a people of faith bearing witness to the revelation of Christ- who Christ is and what Christ has done- belong doing so in social platforms? Good question. The answer. Yes! Why? First and foremost because it is what Christ's example and commission to us, as the church, includes.

Harold T. Lewis, in his book *Christian Social Witness*, writes, "*Christian social witness is not a mere footnote to foundations of our faith, but is an outgrowth of them. It is faith in action. It is what we do as a consequence of what we believe.... A church that makes no social witness is unimaginable because such witness is part and parcel of our job description as church.*" (1) In their book *To Do Justice*, made up of testimonies from Christians putting faith in action, Peters and Hinson-Hasty seek to emphasize, "*Christianity is not simply a personal and private matter between an individual and God; it is also about community responsibility and faithfulness in public life- social, political, and economic.*" (xix) It is to this task of witness (justice), along with others, that Christ says imperatively to the church, "Go!"

The Greek word in the New Testament for "witness" is *marturion*, a public testimony of one's faith. This term gradually came to signify a person who witnessed even unto death: hence the term martyr. Another Greek word associated with "witness" in the New Testament is *euangelion* (evangelism), publicly sharing the good news of who Christ is and what Christ has done. I can't help but think of the inspirational quote, "Preach the gospel, and when necessary, use words." Add to the term "witness" the term "social" and it emphasizes the arena in which that witness is made- that is, not safely ensconced with fellow Christians within the walls and stained-glass windows of our church, but in society at large.

Did you know? The term "witness", like I just defined, is the most repeated concept and word in the book of Revelation. We often think of Revelation as an apocalyptic text, and sure it speaks of eschatology and the end times, but at the foundation of Revelation is the charge for us to be witnesses to the revelation of Christ. It is a call to faith in action.

Did you know? The Presbyterian Church (USA), the Christian Reformed Protestant Denomination of which First Presbyterian is a part, has an Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C. It was created and founded on the mission and commission of Christ calling forth disciples to bear witness to the revelation of who Christ is and what Christ has done.

Important to note, I think, is that when we are talking about "witness" we are also including "justice." Justice (righteousness) is a concept that is inextricably woven into the rich tapestry of Scripture.

When the early Israelites wanted to know the key to what God was requiring of them, Micah replied Do. Love. Walk., **“Do justice, love kindness (mercy), and walk humbly with your God.”** (Micah 6:8)

Jesus takes on the topic of “justice” as “righteousness” head on. Theologically, it is difficult to argue any level of “justice” or “righteousness” without including Jesus because Jesus is the full and complete picture of “righteousness.”

At one level justice suggests doing what is right, just, and pleasing in God’s sight. As a biblical concept justice also conveys a sense of advocacy- of taking up the cause of groups who for a variety of reasons (economic, social, sexual, geographic, racial) have been abused and mistreated by those in power.

Twenty chapters earlier from his post-resurrection commissioning, Jesus is accounted as teaching in the synagogue saying, **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the day of the Lord’s favor.”** (Luke 4:18)

Theologian Richard Hooker argues, “The church is the extension of the Incarnation. The visible church is formed by God from the crucified body of Christ”; that of servant leadership, witness, grace, forgiveness, sacrifice, love, Spirit, and truth.

Jesus proclaimed loving justice and embodied loving justice and now Jesus stands before the disciples, those wondering “How could this be? Is this commission for real?”, that includes you and me in the here and now, and says, “You bet it is, so GO! and do likewise.”

Responding to God’s Word: Examples for our response to God’s word today are numerous. Consider our call to *IMPACT: Pursuing Change, Being Changed*. We are called to serve others, help others, love others, get to know others, our neighbors, as a way of bearing witness to the good news of Christ. This response is one we can all participate in, for as long as we bear the image of Christ in our hearts through faith, we have the privilege and opportunity to reflect Christ to others.

College Student Commissioning: However, today we want to look into a specific demographic within the church and that is those who are college age. (Bulletin Insert) Did you know? College students are called to bear witness too. College is not a timeout from our commissioning. But I don't know if I have the time with schoolwork, hanging out with friends, internship, extracurriculars? What if the people in my sorority or fraternity or sports team or new roommates don't do that? What about the expectations and anticipations that college is my time to let loose, explore, and spread my wings? What about the temptations looming around every corner? If you ask yourself those questions, you are right. Those can be real challenges. I get it. I wasn't there that long ago. You are called, and equipped, to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. Your back may be up against a wall. The odds may seem stacked up against you. You may feel down. "Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome." With God there is a way. With God the odds will crumble. With God you are never out.

That encouragement is not just for those entering another year of college or heading off to college for the first time. You may be in a year of discovery. The glory of God can be experienced in your exploration, discovery, and growth. You may be someone who has been working toward a goal for a long time and have recently felt doubt and fear as to whether you can overcome and finish. Perseverance and endurance are characteristics born out of the strength and courage embodied through the challenges of life. You may be someone who feels guilty for something you have done or not done. Repentance is not in vain for the forgiveness of sins is found in Christ.

College, this time of your life, is fun (a lot of fun). It is filled with opportunity and experiences and relationships. This time of your life can also be scary and challenging and full of unknowns. Embrace it and trust that you are not alone, for God, who is great and awesome, is with you. We, the church surrounding you, are with you and rooting for you.

Let us pray: Faithful God, in baptism you claimed us; and by your Holy Spirit you are working in all of our lives, empowering us to live a life worthy of our calling. Today, we thank you for your love and care and call for each of these college students in this time and place: (see bulletin insert). We pray they will be established in your truth and guided by your Holy Spirit. In your service may they grow in faith, hope, and love, bearing witness to Christ as faithful disciples. To you God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.