

First Presbyterian Church  
“Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind: Witnesses”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 24:1-12

They had traveled millions of miles through space looking for the kind of peace that could not be found on earth. They finally arrived at a planet that they thought might suit them, but when they landed, the people of the planet who had seen the rocket ship land made no effort to come and greet them. The Captain of the ship was flummoxed. Why would the people whose civilization obviously had no space travel not want to come and greet him? He thought that the people might be afraid, yet a quick scan of the nearby city proved that to be untrue. People were going about their everyday lives. Irritated with being ignored, the Captain sent his subordinate into the city to discover the reason the people had not come out. When the subordinate returned, he told the Captain that the people had not come out because the landing was inconsequential. It was inconsequential because the week before the landing a man had arrived on the planet; a man for whom the people had been waiting perhaps a million years. This man had healed people, comforted the poor, and confronted the powers. The result was a world of peace. When the captain of the ship heard this story, he was shocked, stunned. “Could it be ‘him’?” he wondered. But no, that could not be. The Captain would not believe that man was the man unless there was proof. In his quest for proof the Captain first questioned the mayor of the town who verified the story. Undaunted, the Captain wanted proof of the healings. The mayor pointed to his son and told the Captain that his son had had a withered arm that was healed. That was not proof said the Captain. The mayor then had a painting brought out that showed the son with the withered arm...again not proof. Eventually the Captain interviewed thousands of people who told the same stories of healings, comfort, and peace. Regardless of their stories the Captain refused to believe until he had proof; until he had seen the man for himself. And so, the Captain entered his rocket ship once again, and headed to other planets convinced that one day he would find the man and gain the proof he desired.

This story is called “The Man” and it is a chapter in Ray Bradbury’s book “The Illustrated Man.” It was Bradbury’s way of wrestling with the struggle between proof and witness, between faith and proof. Bradbury understood that human beings are people who desire proof of things and yet often, must live by faith. Consider for a moment the COVID vaccines. How many of us, before there were vaccines, if met by a stranger on the corner saying, “Hey, listen, I have a cure for COVID in this bottle. Want some?” would have jumped at the chance to take it? Chances are not many of us would have done so because we wanted proof; the proof that comes from double blind studies and ongoing trials. We wanted proof that the vaccines were safe and effective. And desiring proof is not something new; something that only came about following the scientific revolution. Look at Peter in our morning’s story. He hears that the tomb is empty and yet he is not willing to believe the women and must go see for himself. He needs proof. And the other disciples are not even willing to go see because their very idea of an empty tomb is absurd. The question becomes then, if proof is so important, why doesn’t Luke give it to us? Why doesn’t he let us know that on that first Easter morning, someone saw the resurrected Jesus?

Let me explain. Let’s go back to Luke’s telling of the Easter story. As he tells the story there is no proof. There are simply the women who see the empty tomb and two men in white who ask the women, “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” and declare that Jesus is risen. That’s it. There is no encounter with a physical Jesus. Granted, in Luke, encounters with the resurrected Jesus eventually come but the Easter morning story has no such meeting. This runs counter to Matthew’s and John’s telling of the

tale where people meet the resurrected Jesus. Matthew has the two Marys meet Jesus as they leave the empty tomb...proof. John has Mary Magdalene meet Jesus in the garden and take hold of him...proof. Yet, Luke gives us none of that. He has the two men tell the two women, who then tell the disciples. There is no proof. Why would Luke do this? My response is that Luke tells the tale this way because this is where we are, and it is who we can become. Let me say that again. I believe Luke shapes his story in this way because we are where the women are, and we can become what the women became. Let me explain.

First, we are where the women are. We are those who have not seen, touched, or shared a meal with the physically risen Jesus. Like the women, we are dependent upon others who met the risen Christ and then told others, who told others, who told still others. We are those who are dependent on a chain of witnesses that has stretched across the last two thousand years. In that sense we are not alone. We are in the company of those for whom Luke wrote his Gospel. He wrote it for Gentiles, Greeks, who would not have seen the physically risen Jesus and were thus dependent upon other witnesses...just as the women were with the witness of the angels. We are also in the company of those Christians in Corinth to whom Paul wrote. None of them would have had any possible encounter with the resurrected Jesus and so, like us, are dependent upon the witness of those 500, and Peter, and Paul himself. And so, Luke's telling to two witnesses, telling two more witnesses, who then tell others reminds those folks and us, that we are not alone in needing the witness of others to guide our faith. It allows us to be insiders to the story and not those thinking, "Boy if only I could have proof like Mary and the Marys." At the same time this story is a reminder that we are not only where they are, but we can become who they are. We can become witnesses.

When I say that we are witnesses I mean more than we are those who tell the story of Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning. What I mean is that we are witnesses to more than a story. We are witnesses to the active presence and power of the risen Jesus. In other words, because Jesus is risen and reigning, we can and do encounter him in ways that we cannot encounter other great teachers, prophets, and philosophers. Though Buddha, Confucius, Aristotle, and even Moses the Law-giver gave us insightful teaching and the Torah, none of them personally encounter and transform us as does Jesus. We have encountered the living Jesus in ways that have shaped and transformed who we are. We have encountered in the living Jesus in moments when we needed forgiveness and reconciliation and he offered it. We have encountered the living Jesus in the moments when those whom we loved took their last breath, and we knew that in Christ their lives were not over and there was a new chapter being written. And so, we become witnesses such that without having seen the physically risen Jesus, our encounters with him, like Paul's on the road to Damascus, are real, powerful, and life transforming. We then, are witnesses not to an empty tomb, but to a risen Jesus.

At the end of the story "The Man" there is a short exchange between the mayor of the town and some of the starship crew members who stayed behind, rather than going with the captain in search of truth. This is how it goes. *"Yes, poor man, he's gone," said the mayor. "And he'll go on, planet after planet, seeking and seeking, and always he will be an hour late, or a half hour late, or ten minutes late, or a minute late. And finally he will miss out by only a few seconds. And when he has visited three hundred worlds and is seventy or eighty years old he will miss out by only a fraction of a second, and then a smaller fraction of a second. And he will go on and on, thinking to find that very thing which he left behind here, on this planet, in this city-"* Martin looked steadily at the mayor. *The mayor put out his hand. "Was there ever any doubt of it?" He beckoned to the others and turned. "Come along now. We mustn't keep him waiting." They walked into the city.* This morning we are those who have walked into the city, who have experienced the man, the resurrected and risen one who loves, heals, forgives, and changes the world. The challenge for us then is to go and be witnesses to all we have heard and experienced of the risen Jesus.