

- Today is the third Sunday of Easter.
- A couple of weeks have passed since we celebrated the day of resurrection.
- But our gospel readings over the past couple of weeks have kept us firmly fixed within the narrative of that day.
  
- So to recap, early in the morning the women have gone to the tomb and found no sign of a body.
- What they find instead are two men in dazzling clothes who tell them that Jesus is not there but has risen.
- But when they report this to the other disciples, they are met, for the most part, with disbelief.
  - The women’s words seem to them to be “an idle tale”.
  
- But then some other disciples are on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus and they encounter Jesus himself but they only recognise him when he shares a meal with them and then he promptly vanishes.
- They immediately return to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples that, “the Lord has risen indeed!”.
  
- We don’t actually know whether, in contrast to those first women, their experience is more readily accepted by those who are listening to them, because while they are still speaking, Jesus himself stands among them.
- It is certainly true that Jesus has to spend some time reassuring them that he is in fact real and not a ghost, so perhaps the disciples are just having a really hard time coming to terms with this new reality!
  
- Whatever the case, Jesus goes on to open their minds to understand the scriptures and says 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”.
  
- And our gospel reading finishes with Jesus’ words to his disciples,
  - “You are witnesses of these things”.
  
- “You are witnesses to these things”.
  
- And those words carry a double meaning.

- To witness something is to experience it first hand,
  - to be on the scene when something happens,
    - to see it with our own eyes, hear it with our own ears, touch it with our own hands,
  - to experience events as they are actually happening,
  
- There is, of course, a second meaning to being a witness and that is to report, to speak of, to communicate, what it is that you have seen and heard and felt.
  
- So when Jesus says to those first disciples,
  - “You are witnesses to these things”,
    - he is not only acknowledging their first-hand experience of his life and death and resurrection, he is also commissioning them to speak of those things,
      - to somehow communicate the reality of their experience.
  
- And that is our calling as well,
  - to be witnesses to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,
  - to be witnesses to our own experience of God's life-giving power in our own lives.
  
- And all of us are witnesses.
  
- Today we are celebrating World Heritage Day, which is marked every year on April 18.
  
- And a number of you have entered into the spirit of that celebration by wearing clothing that expresses part of your cultural identity and we are going to continue after the service to enjoy our rich cultural heritage and diversity in the food we share for morning tea!
  
- Now, World Heritage Day is not a day we find in the church's calendar of feasts and festivals.
- It was, in fact, initiated by UNESCO and its purpose is to encourage local communities and individuals throughout the world to consider the importance of cultural heritage to their lives, identities and communities, and to promote awareness of its diversity and vulnerability and the efforts required to protect and conserve it.
- And that seems like a good thing for us to do.

- After all, we who gather here are a diverse group of people.
- We are shaped by different national and cultural identities, different experiences and different life stories.
- And all of that is something to be treasured and celebrated not only because it has contributed to who we are as individuals and as a congregation but because it bears witness to the wonder and mystery of God's purpose and presence in our lives and in the world.
  
- All of us gathered here, in our diversity and in the uniqueness of our individual lives, can tell the story of God at work within us.
  - Each one of us gathered here can tell the story of God at work within our lives, both individually and collectively.
    - Each one of us is a witness to the power of God at work within us.
      - Each one of us has a story to tell of God's presence and activity in our lives.
        - That is why we are here.
  
- And for us to live out our calling to be witnesses is simply to tell those stories,
  - to tell the stories of our lives,
    - to tell the stories of how we have experienced God's life-giving power in our lives,
    - to tell the story of how we are drawn to follow Jesus,
    - to tell the stories of how we have experienced peace and comfort,
      - strength and encouragement,
      - mercy and forgiveness,
      - compassion and healing.
  
- Our job as "witnesses to these things" is not to recite philosophical proofs for the existence of God.
- Our job is not to give a precise account of the doctrines of the church.
- Our job is certainly not to coerce or frighten people with spurious threats of punishment or hell or damnation.
- Our job, our calling, is simply to tell the stories of our lives:
  - how we have experienced hope and healing in the midst of difficulty and despair,
  - how we have experienced peace and calm in the midst of chaos and uncertainty,
  - how we have experienced love and friendship and moments of unexpected grace and beauty,

- how we have experienced the wonder of resurrection in moments of new beginnings,
  - how we have experienced moments of presence.
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- This is what it means to be witnesses to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.
  - And the important thing to remember in all of this is that we do not do it alone.
  - We are a community of witnesses.
  - But we are also people empowered in that witness by God's gift of the Holy Spirit