

“You are Witnesses of These Things”

Acts 3:12-19, I John 3:1-7, Luke 24:36b-48

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 3, April 18, 2021, dedicated to John David Schwartz, born to parents Cori Lynn and Ben Schwartz on April 6th and to my granddaughter Emryn Renee Ahrens on her first birthday and always to the glory of God!

“You are Witnesses of These Things”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In Luke 24:36b-48, our Risen Savior appears to his disciples – again. They believe they are seeing a ghost, but he shows them flesh and bones. He offers them his hands and feet – four proofs that he is who he says he is. He wants them to see his wounds.

He doesn't want them to look in his eyes or listen to his voice. He wants them to look and see his hands and his feet.

“LOOK at my hands and feet,” he says.

These hands... These were the hands that had reached for his mother Mary in the manger of Bethlehem and then reached for

the stars where God and the angels shined holy light. These hands had played with the children of Egypt and Nazareth and worked at his father's carpenter's bench. These hands had broken bread and shared cooked fish by the seaside – just as he was doing now, eating fish with them. These hands had pressed mud against a blind man's eyes and lifted Lazarus out of the tomb. These hands had danced in the air when he taught, and reached out to lepers who others would push away; he drew them in. These hands pulled them when they needed to walk forward and pushed them when they were troubled and couldn't step out to face their fears. These were hard working, compassionate, loving and just hands.

And these feet... These feet had been his strong foundation throughout his life. These feet had carried him through the desert, back from Egypt to Palestine as a boy. And then these feet took him to the temple where, at the feet of the rabbis, he taught them what the scripture meant. These feet had been his leverage when working with his father at the carpenter's bench, his strength and guide when he descended into the muddy Jordan River's waters for baptism. These feet had carried him to prayer in the desert, and into a faceoff with The Devil, into the fray of thousands of miles of places and situations from which most people walked away. These feet moved him toward people starving for food and good news. These feet had taken him on walks of solitude and into crowds of need. These feet had taken him into the homes of criminals and tax-collectors, corrupt synagogue bureaucrats and dying children – all whom he treated like long lost friends. These were courageous, forward moving, mission focused and justice action feet.

Both his hands and feet bore newly healing scars of crucifixion now.

The left hand, the right hand, the left foot, the right foot – all four of them broken and bruised and torn apart from the crucifying cross where he had hung just a few days before. And the Risen Christ wants his disciples to look at a sight like they had never seen it before – the hands and the feet of their crucified and Risen Lord because they had never looked before and they had to look now.

He wants them to see – that despite the brokenness of his hands and feet – the danger has passed and God has transformed this vicious death into a victory for life. The Risen Christ has gone through the danger and not around it. His hands and his feet bear that truth. His broken, bruised and torn hands and feet now reveal as witnesses, the hope of the future.

He wants his closest friends to look and see and to feel the truth. He needs them to be witnesses to the truth. After eating with them, after opening their eyes and hearts to the truth about the Law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms – he commissions them, he tells them as a blessing to bear witness to all these things.

“You are Witnesses of These Things.” All they have seen with their eyes, their hands, their feet – their hearts – they must now receive and share with others what they are witnessing.

Think of this.

They have no iphones, no devices, no computers, no televisions. There’s no social media. They have no social networking sites, no image sharing and message sharing sites, no video sharing sites, no

social blogging or podcasting, no social community and discussion groups online. They don't even have Yahoo! Answers (but then again - neither do we anymore).

All they have is themselves as witnesses to these things. And now – on April 18, 2021 – we have to imagine in our mind's eye that all Jesus has is our eyes and our hands, our feet and our hearts as witnesses of “these things.” That's right. You and I are now the witnesses of all these things, the witnesses for Jesus Christ.

It is essential that we see the hands and feet of our Risen Savior. You and I need to step up and take a good long look. Love requires us to look. Love requires us to use our hands and feet after we look.

Too many of us want to live in our heads or in a bubble of a world that we've created for our own protection. And we can create all sorts of worlds in our heads – some of them real and others far from real. With our hands and feet, we can move from our heads into acts of compassion and action.

As witnesses and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can also move others with their hands and their feet. I would love to simply spiritualize this message about hands and feet, but I can't. Instead, I have to tell you we need to be witnesses of the whole Easter story. For us to be Easter people we have to be witnesses. We have to face the truth and speak the truth in love. I would also love to offer happy talk about the things I have witnessed in the past few weeks and months. But I can't. I need to be honest and speak the truth in love.

First, we witness many things in our lives all the time. We are over the moon for the birth of our babies – Jack David Schwartz, and Emily and Scott Montgomery just welcomed Cameron Elizabeth into the world.

There are many witnesses on this day. I am one! My granddaughter is one today!

Yesterday, many celebrated the return of the Buckeyes to Ohio Stadium with 20,000 fans spread across 105,000 seats. It looked pretty sparse. But they were happy and we were witnesses. And you were texting me about it. These are happy witnesses!

Also, many of us were witnesses to the death and yesterday's funeral and burial of Prince Phillip, husband of Queen Elizabeth. The world was watching the power of ritual and the remembrance of people across the globe who witnessed his family's farewell.

And no one will ever forget the witness of the Queen – by herself – wearing her mask, all alone to grieve her husband of 73 years. She was witness to anyone in COVID-time who has lost a loved one and knows what that looks like and feels like.

In the same week, we have been witnesses to one horrific incident and shooting after another. I have witnessed Daunte Wright being shot and killed in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota on a car stop (for an air-freshener?) by a police officer. I have witnessed Miles Jackson being shot and killed by security guards and Columbus police in St. Ann's Hospital Emergency Room in Westerville, Ohio. I have witnessed 13-year-old, Adam Toledo being shot and killed by a Chicago Police officer on March 29th – Monday of Holy Week.

All of these were young men of color. All killed by white police officers. We may not like to say that out loud but as witnesses we must say it out loud.

As one witness for justice had on a banner last night at a rally in downtown Columbus, “Columbus is not safe for Black people.” Sadly, that banner could be found in every town and city in America this morning. That’s what witnesses witness to.

Thursday night, I witnessed a 19-year-old, Brandon Hole, open fire on workers at a FedEx site in Indianapolis, Indiana and kill eight people and wound five more. We know that four of those killed were from a small and tight religious community – from the Sikh community.

Just last night, again in Columbus, Ohio, I witnessed another shooting in which one person was killed and five wounded in a drive-by murder as people were gathered to remember the one-year anniversary of a loved one killed at that site in southeast Columbus by a Dollar General Store. Now in the first 108 days of 2021, we have had 148 mass shootings.

There are so many more stories just in this week of people being shot and killed and shot and wounded. Some of these shootings – like many of those I just spoke of – have been police shooting citizens. It continues – unabated – as the Trial of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd moves through the final stages, people are killing each other.

Too many people are killing each other. We are all witnesses. Witnesses take action. Laws need to be changed. Hearts and minds need to change. This needs to end. Now!

All week, I have been witnessing the individual and collective trauma for our members and my friends and colleagues within our African American community who are being traumatized and retraumatized by the day-in-and-day-out violence and racial hatred which has been enacted against them, against their loved ones, and against the Black and Brown men, women and children in our community and this nation.

And it is not all about guns and traffic stops and street shootings. Witnesses need to look further.

On Monday, April 12, the Cleveland Plain Dealer published an Op-Ed I wrote. It was entitled, *“We Can and We Must Reduce Black Maternal Mortality in Ohio Now.”* The maternal mortality rate in the US is the highest of any developed nation in the world and it is rising. Black, Brown, and Indigenous women are 2-3 times more likely to die from pregnancy related causes than white women.

Between 2008 and 2016 in Ohio, there were 29.5 maternal deaths per 100,000 Black mothers to 11.5 per 100,000 among white mothers. Let’s remember – one death is too many. I also pointed out that right now – through dollars in the Recovery Act and opportunities to fund community based medical care for pregnant women of color, we can turn this around NOW in Ohio. It is up to the State Legislature to make this happen.

As I shared in this article with Black moms in our congregation and in our Columbus community, I was blown away as one after another called me or texted me or emailed me to share horror stories about their birthing experiences in Central Ohio and the overall mistreatment of their sisters and friends during pregnancy and delivery. It was as though my article simply revealed the tip of

the iceberg of how bad it really is – beyond death – there are so many who have simply had extremely difficult pre-natal care and birth stories.

Now, I am more determined to see these laws passed and dollars received to care for women of color in their pregnancies and deliveries. I invite you to join me as a witness in this effort.

When we are in relationship with others, when we see their hands, their feet, their wounds, their pain, their physical distress, their hunger, their needs, their mental distress, their trauma-related to racism, sexism, homophobia, disabilities unattended and poorly served, and simply the growing effects of this pandemic – we need to be witnesses to these things.

Call me paranoid or call me prophetic (you may call me both) but I had a vision the other day. I was thinking about the long-term effects on survivors and first responders from 9/11 which is now 20 years past. As you know, the survivors from the twin towers and the women and men who attended to the dead and the clean-up at Ground Zero in the months and years following the destruction of the World Trade Center and the death of 2606 in NYC faced many physical and mental health challenges.

Except for the valiant efforts of American citizens like Jon Stewart and others who refused to forget them, their health coverage would not have been taken care of and their long-term effects would not have been dealt with. The witnesses to those things never gave up.

Here is where my vision came in. I thought of our front-line workers right now, who, through these 14 months of pandemic have cared for 566,000+ unto death and nurtured millions back to health. I thought

of them – behind the scenes – who have daily put themselves on the line for our nation in need.

And all of the sudden, I had this weird feeling – that outside of taking care of themselves – in a year, in a few years, ten years and more – the rest of us had forgotten them, all that they did for us. They had become a distant memory. All our signs, our horns honking, all of hand-clapping and cheering had passed. Then they found themselves alone and they found themselves taking this all on by themselves and this long nightmare of giving wasn't cared for anymore. And I thought to myself, "God help us not to let this happen to them. Let us be for them witnesses as they have been for us in this time of crisis."

I pray to God the answer is – "we will all be there for them as they have been here for us!"

Likewise, who will be there for the victims of shootings when the guns stop firing? Who will care for the families and their children and their children's children? Who will listen, be present to hear the stories of facing constant gunfire, and hold them in their grief and defend them in their trials? Who will be there to counter and fight racism – in all its micro-aggressive forms as well as macro-aggressive forms?

Who will be witnesses of these things?

Is it enough to witness the love of Jesus in your heart? I think Jesus would say, "It is not enough." And that is why he took time with the disciples to show them his hands and his feet, to show them what pain looks like – and by doing this he would show them what it looks like to care for others forever.

When you see the Risen Christ's hands and feet, I want you to see the hands and feet of those in our beloved community who are wounded in pain and traumatized by hate and the constant barrage of assaults on their humanity.

The words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel come to mind as I close today. He once said, "Some are guilty, but all are responsible." We may not be guilty of any crimes and we may not have wronged any one person or any one group. But we are all witnesses of these things. And that makes us responsible. We are all responsible.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are all in this. We are all being called to spread good news and to be good news.

We are all witnesses of these things. May we also be change agents of these things in the name of the Risen Christ! Amen.