

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Lori A. Buehler, at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Sunday, April 22, 2012, the Third Sunday of Easter, dedicated to the glory of God.

“The Making of a Witness”

Luke 24:36-48

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May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

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Just last Sunday we heard a similar account, from the gospel of John, of two appearances by Jesus to the disciples. In those instances, he also greeted them with “Peace be with you” and showed them the wounds in his hands and side. In this version, he shows them his hands and feet and also eats in their presence.

Hands and Feet

These were the same hands that had healed the sick, that reached out to lepers and the poor and women, that broke bread with them and blessed their spirits. These were the same feet that had led them through Galilee and beyond, the same feet that the sinful woman in (Luke 7:37-38) had wiped with her tears and dried with her hair, and then anointed with alabaster ointment.

These hands and feet were wounded now. As Barbara Brown Taylor notes in her sermon “Hands and Feet” in *Home by Another Way*: “Earlier, when (the disciples) had figured out what was coming to those beloved hands and feet, they had fled, hiding themselves away where they could not see the bleeding nor hear the pounding of the hammers.

“Look, (Jesus) said to them afterwards, when the danger was past, *You can look at them now*. He wanted them to know he had gone through the danger and not around it, so he told them to look

– not at his face, not into his eyes – but at his hands and feet, which told the truth about what had happened to him.”

In doing so, he also plants that image in the minds of humans for all generations. The hands and feet remind us he knew our own experience of being alive; the wounds remind us how he shares in every hurt we could possibly know.

And yet, he does not stop there. For after the revealing, he reminds them that everything written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets and psalms had been fulfilled. He then adds that this is all written – the suffering, the rising from the dead, the proclaiming of repentance and forgiveness of sins – for another reason. For these words are also a call to action, a charge for the rest of their lives: **“You are witnesses of these things.”**

His appearance in the locked room was not just a visit to provide proof of the resurrection. It was not just a visit of reassurance that all was being fulfilled and that everything would be all right. It provided instructions for how they were to live without him, go on without him. For their hands would now be *his hands*; their feet *his feet*; their mouths releasing the words of *his holy spirit*. And so begins the next part of their journey – the gathering of their courage to come out of their hiding place and tell the story of the Messiah.

What does it mean to be his hands and feet in our time?

Our own hands and feet portray our experiences and betray our priorities. Cracked and calloused from working a shovel in construction; dirt under the nails from digging in the garden; manicured and colorful for love of beauty; oil-stained from repairing cars; scarred from injury in the mill or factory or war. Gentle but dry from constant washing while tending to the sick; dressed with the jewels of beautiful rings; a pale ring in the skin where a wedding ring had been worn; or bent, arthritic and wrinkled from age. Feet swollen from standing at a cash register or standing at the bus stop, or perhaps from the weight of pregnancy.

Following Jesus – becoming a witness

In his book, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, Robin R. Meyers (pastor of Mayflower Congregational UCC church in Oklahoma City), makes the claim that we are too quick to rush to the risen Christ, bypassing the journey of the disciples, that of following Jesus of Nazareth. And in so doing, we have forgotten how to follow Jesus.

The Jesus the disciples encountered, Meyers reminds us, was the Jesus before the ascended Christ. **Who was Jesus before he was the Christ?** Meyers reminds us that, before there were clergy, hierarchy and keepers of the Biblical canon, “there were ordinary fishermen who forsook ordinary lives to follow an itinerant sage down a path that was not obvious, sensible, or safe. He might as well have said, ‘Come die with me.’ ” *This* was the Jesus that the disciples in that room knew. And this is the Jesus who remains when all the biblical embellishment and commentary is stripped away.

Jesus was revealing God to the people in a new way. And even as we heal the sick in his name, champion social justice in his name, help the poor in his name, we are to be **witnesses** and tell the story. To tell the most radical story in our time – that God came to us, and revealed God’s self, in a human form – the story that challenged the old world view and challenges us still, that turned everything that we thought was true upside down: The last shall be first. To be lost is to be found. Love your family, but love God more.

Jesus did not appear to the disciples in the locked room with another list of commandments, ethical principles, or a to-do list of social wrongs to be righted. He came with a singular purpose – to urge them to look at, to really see – and touch – the wounds of his hands and feet. To have a final reminder that God had dared to come among them in human form. And to **proclaim the good news** to anyone who would listen.

All they had, the disciples and the other Jews who followed Jesus, was the stories of Jesus of Nazareth. The Sermon on the Mount, and the upside-down parables and the broken social rules and the communing with lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes and the poor – these were told right alongside the stories of the cross and the resurrection. Before Holy Week, there was Jesus of Nazareth among the people. Before the Christ and Savior, there was Jesus the teacher and healer. And *that* was the Jesus the disciples knew.

Church as witness

We want to be a church of mission and ministry, and to be agents of God's mercy and justice. But have we remembered that the Lord requires us "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with (y)our God" (Micah 6:6-8) not just because it is the right thing, but because **we have a story to tell?** We are witnesses. We remember. And we tell the story so that it is not lost on our children, or our culture. (We tell) that God entered humanity in a singular way that forever shaped the relationship of God's people with God. As we express compassion for this world, we must be faithful. As we clamor for justice, we must ring the sounds of our faith. (Otherwise, we might as well join any civic group committed to helping the community and humanity, for we do not help in God's name, or as followers of Jesus of Nazareth.)

As the **hands and feet** of Jesus in our own time, we serve the poor, travel to the needy, invite the disenfranchised, comfort the lonely. But here in this sanctuary, as in the locked room where the disciples hid and Jesus appeared, we are reminded to remember, and to tell the story.

And so we must first tell and re-tell the story to each other – to remember, as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon (in their book *Resident Aliens*) proclaim, "There was a time when the church believed that though there was nothing in Jesus we needed to kill for, there was something here worth fighting for, dying for."

B.R.E.A.D. as witness

You have likely heard of the interfaith group B.R.E.A.D. (Building Responsibility, Equality and Dignity), and of the annual Nehemiah Assembly to be held May 7 – a great gathering of several thousand faithful people. Although an interfaith group, B.R.E.A.D. is a great example of being the hands and feet of Jesus to “the least of these.” The focus this year is on job creation, health care for all and restorative justice for youth in the juvenile justice system.

I encourage you to attend this great assembly. I am going to attend. But I’m going to remind myself that I am not there just as a mother or a champion for at-risk youth, and that I’m not there just because of a good heart and an ethical mind. I am there as a person of faith, and I am there to witness to the injustices and needs of our time because of Jesus of Nazareth.

And, I am going to go there looking for Jesus – in the people helping, and the people being helped, but mostly in those who are courageous and bold enough to tell the old, old story of God’s love and mercy.

The witness of Mary and Pauley

Years ago, between college and seminary, I worked at a rest home for the aged in Barnstable Village on the east coast of Cape Cod. Pauley was the cook. She worked long shifts to help support her family of two children and husband who was often working off-shore. She was what was fondly referred to at the time as a “tough broad.” She worked like a horse, and cussed like a sailor. When she was really wound up, she would mop the kitchen floor of the rest home, then go home and scrub her own floor on her hands and knees. Her skin was red and sweaty from working over old hot stoves all day, and her hands were dry and wrinkly from hours scrubbing pots and pans in soapy water.

The residents loved her. This might have been due to her hearty laugh, her slightly-dirty jokes, her constant teasing (“Now Mabel, if you don’t get out of bed for breakfast, you’re gonna have

cold hotcakes for dinner.”) And it might have had something to do with the “socials” she instigated when the boss was away. From out of nowhere, cheap wine (that is, “jug wine” with a cap), cheese and crackers would appear. We would cajole or wheel everyone we could out to the living room, seat them in a circle, and crank up the record player (for those of you too young to remember, these were mechanical things that played music by setting down a needle on a spinning vinyl record). Old familiar tunes from Elvis and Harry Belafonte, Doris Day and Motown would fill the air. Men and women who spent the day sitting on the porch, staring at the television, or wandering the halls looking for a departed loved one, would get up and . . . truly . . . dance! They did a waltz or a jig, the Charleston or the swing. And they smiled, and giggled, flirted a bit and laughed.

And then there was Mary. She was lonely and ornery and would have none of it. As the newest aide, I was responsible for bathing, dressing and changing her. She had a reputation for not wanting any part of any body – staff or resident. She would resist fresh linens and clothes, and spit out her dentures when she was really mad. She was a bent-over 4’8”, but could grip your arm like a vice when she wanted something. But over time, she softened a bit.

She loved to hear the old tunes - *Jesus Loves Me, This Little Light of Mine, I Want to Follow Jesus* - sung softly as she let the day go for restful sleep. When gently teased, she responded with delight as if she was a child again. She shared brief phrases of memories and smiles appeared despite herself. And on any given day, one of her arthritic gnarled hands grasped a rosary. The crucifix above her bed was a bit daunting to me, but the faded picture of Mother Mary holding the wounded Jesus in her arms, gazed at while saying the rosary, melted my heart. When finally falling into a deep sleep, she would awaken suddenly when the rosary had loosened from her grip and fallen among the bed sheets. Once it was back in her hand, she calmed again. I confessed to her that I was trying to get up the courage to try seminary, and she patted my arm and reassured me in her way. As time went on, she also opened her

heart to Pauley the cook and to her children who would come for a visit.

And so in that old rest home by the sea, the cook that cussed like a sailor ***served her charges with the wrinkly hands and swollen feet of Jesus.*** And the old woman who clutched her rosary and prayed to a faded picture ***bore the marks of the wounds of Jesus in her arthritic hands, and witnessed to her abiding faith.***

Long ago, after Jesus had risen but before he had ascended to God, witnesses were made. In that locked room, a room that had been full of disappointment and grief, followers who hid and feared for their lives became ambassadors who feared nothing, even death itself. The **wounds** called them to be the *hands and feet of Jesus* in their world, but **Jesus himself** called them to *tell the story*, to proclaim the good news, to witness to the Jesus of Nazareth and to the risen Christ.

I don't know about you, but I want **all God has to offer**. I want to walk with Jesus, in the good times but especially in the rough and scary and wracked-with-grief times. I want to meet him in the world – in the faces of his people, and the hands and feet of the faithful who serve in his name - and know that death does not have the last word. I want to breathe in the Holy Spirit through the breath of babies and the dying, through the wise elders and the winds of spring. And I want to know that God is a forever, Almighty God, who is strong in vulnerability, who overcame the powers on earth even through nails on a cross.

I want to be a witness, so that Jesus did not reveal his wounds in vain . . . And I want some company on the journey.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.

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