

Sermon for April 18-21 by Pastor Hanberry

“Being Witnesses to the Story of the Church” 4-18-21 TUCC **Ser21-14**
Acts 3:11-19; Psalm 4:2-9; 1 John 3:1-7; **Luke 24:36-48**

To start. Let me remind you of the very obvious thing about these Sundays after Easter Sunday: The six Sundays after E. Sunday form the Easter Season of the church year. We’re exploring the stories of the post resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples. This season also: ► gives Jesus the opportunity to find his disciples; ► to gather them up from their places of hiding/lockdown; to wrap his loving arms of peace around them; ► to lead them back into the mission of sharing the gospel of JC; ► and inspire them to re-claim the work God pleases upon them.

And it’s our single mission to embrace these stories, claim them as our own and BEIEVING IN THE POWER OF the risen, living Christ connect these stories with the stories of our own lives.

“Being Witnesses to the Story of the Church.” Both of our texts (Acts and Luke) make a strong point about the disciples being “witnesses of these things.” This calls us to share our stories and reflections on our experiences with God and Jesus - actually being witnesses to the story – the Easter story and our story, focusing on the past and future. That may terrify us more than anything else. It’s not so much being terrified like the disciples at the experience of seeing Jesus, it’s more about telling others about our experiences and the impact those experiences have on our life.

I am always on the lookout for people who are willing to share their story of faith: with me, with others – on the street, in a meeting or even at church. I am not going to my gym these days – membership on hold since March a year ago. But earlier this week I found myself driving by the gym..just to see what was happening and coming out of the front door was a guy I know from before named Mark.

I remembered the first time I met Mark: I was walking from my gym to my truck when a man (Mark) stopped me and asked if I had jumper cables. I

was running a little late but I said, "yes." No point in saying, "yes," if I weren't willing to help him jump start his car. I got my truck and came back and got out to help. Smiling, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "I am not surprised that you're helping me. Curious, I asked why he wasn't surprised. He said, with a smile, Before today, I saw something that told me you are a Christian, and I am a Christian too." I smiled, and said, "O K." I must admit, I couldn't help myself but to ask, "What was that; what did you see?" He said, "it was something you wore at the gym one day."

I said, "well, I am a Christian; indeed, I'm a pastor in the UCC." I paused because Sometimes when I tell someone I've just met that I'm a pastor, that news changes everything. Sometimes for the good and sometimes not so good. (GOLF STORY).??? Really.

Then, I asked where he goes to church. He used to go the big COB in Fredrick but since the pastor retired he now goes to First Baptist. He shared how much he loves the church and that his daughter is a student at Liberty U., Jerry Falwell's Univ. down in Lynchburg, VA. We got his car started and chatted a little more and then said, "I hope we can talk some more. Blessing on you."

The point driven home to me as I reflected on this conversation was how comfortable this man, Mark, seemed to be in talking about God, his faith, his joy in his daughter being at Liberty U, her having a life of faith, and being proud of it.

I must admit there's little evidence in this one conversation with Mark to generalize about most people, but I do think it's scary or at least challenging for many folks to actually buy into the Luke's pronouncement: "You are witnesses of these things." That's a place to start.

The best advertizing is word of mouth. One person showing another person who shows another that they love God and follow Jesus' way. You go a new restaurant and you love the experience and you tell someone else. When you have told 12 people and those other 12 people have gone to the

restaurant and shared their positive experience that's around 150 people...therein resides the tipping point for turning this part. Restaurant into a successful business.

It's a truth that when you really love something or find pleasure in it you want to tell others about it. I hate to sound so negative here but this seems to be the truth about all sorts of experiences except for our experiences with God and Jesus and the church. Does our reluctance have anything to do with the reality that God and church are not so exciting, not worth the telling?

Last year in one phase of the Interim Planning team's work I posed four questions for you to consider about Trinity Church:

1. What is it about the totality of your experience at TRINITY UCC that gives you the greatest joy?
2. What is one thing that you love the most in these days in TRINITY UCC?
3. Think of a time in the life of Trinity UCC when you and church were at your best...what was happening?
4. What are "three wishes" you have for TRINITY that would bring joy to your life? Joy to the church?

These are still relevant questions to the stories in Acts and Luke this morning and to this important transition in your life together.

I've asked these questions a lot in my ministry over the years. So, I ask you: **What gives you the greatest JOY here at Trinity?** Like at some churches when I've asked this question, it's the people, the music, the stained-glass windows, prayer shawl ministry; the outreach we make helping the poor. We can't help but share these joys with others. This is a great question for us; it's really a spiritual question, you know. What is it that moves us to give God our gratitude for the gifts of our lives, for the gift of faith?

That's exactly what Peter in Acts and Luke in the gospel stories are holding out to us. Peter, in his sermon and healings in our text from ACTS

today says, "To this we are witnesses. Witnesses to what exactly? Witnesses to the powerful life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Witnesses to Jesus' rejection and torture on the cross. Witnesses to his coming back into our lives as the living Christ. What do we do with these experiences with Jesus?"

Embrace them? Make them our own? Take them with us out in the world? Leave them here in your seat so you can reclaim them for an hour next time you come to Sunday worship?? Or let them fill your hearts and souls with the joy of the risen Christ, a life full of grace.

Have you ever doubted these truths? Have you ever been stunned by the audacity of the church's claim that "Christ is risen, he is risen indeed"?

Well, you are in good company. So did Jesus' first followers. "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost," says Luke. The past was past and there was nothing for them in the future with their Lord and master – Jesus.

Most Easter doubters whom I know are less startled and terrified than they are baffled. A couple of weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, with all the celebration and great recorded music, perhaps they were willing to believe. But just a few Sundays later, in the sober light of post-Easter, well, who can say for sure what it all means? Where are all those people this morning? And what then? What does the risen Christ do? Note: he comes to his doubting, fearful disciples. He "stood among them," and says to them, "Peace be with you!" He stills their fears. He shows them his hands, feet, and the scars of his body. He walks with them on the road to Emmaus. He breaks bread with them...and in that moment they recognize him. They first thought it was too good to be true ("in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering"). Then he ate a meal with them. Then he speaks to them, explains the scriptures to them. And they can't wait to tell others this amazing story. They can't wait to be witnesses to all these things.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.