

YOU ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS

Luke 24:36-49

“Jesus Christ is risen!” “He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” Those words should fill us with joy. But do they in a world of tests, bills, doctors’ visits, and electronic media? No doubt those words mean less to more and more people around us. The United State of America is often called a “Christian” nation. Everyone in the US Congress is a person of faith—no one in that group is an avowed atheist. Yet less than 50% of our population claims no church affiliation. We receive from Iowa State University the “religious preference” of students. Students get on this list voluntarily—they don’t have to claim any religious preference. Only about 1/3 put down a religious preference. The numbers of people who regularly go to church has fallen about 1% each five years for quite a while, even with a growing population. By 2050 it is estimated that less than 10% will be faithful church goers. It is even worse in Europe where less than 4% go regularly. Each year 4,000 churches close in this country, while only 1,000 new one appear. “Jesus Christ is risen!” But so what?

Church leaders have gotten together to find a solution to this. Using state of the art technology, better than anything Ironman could come up with, they have developed the “Evangelator,” the perfect solution to the problem of declining churches.

(We look through the eyes of the “Evangelator” as he goes out into the world getting people to go to church. He encounters a student on campus.)

Evangelator: “Hello, it is not such a bad day outside.”

Student: “Yes, at least it is sunny.”

Evangelator: “Do you ever get to enjoy the weather with a group of other students?”

Student: “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Evangelator: “A group from our church is going to the Ledges this weekend. It would be a great place to see the spring flowers coming up.”

Student: “Oh, that’s nice of you to invite me, but I have a ton of studying to do this weekend.” (She walks away.)

(The Evangelator thinks to himself. “I must try harder the next time.” He enters a building and comes up to a student sitting by a table.)

Evangelator: “Working on some tough homework?”

Student: “Yeah, it’s physics. I can never seem to understand what the prof is trying to explain in class.”

Evangelator: “Can I help you?”

Student: “Do you know anything about alternating current?”

Evangelator: “Yes, I plug into it to recharge my batteries.”

Student: (looks at the evangelator with a questioning face.) “Yeah, I get a charge from the caffeine in my coffee.”

(The evangelator sits with the student and helps him with the homework.)

Student: “You know your stuff. Thanks! Can I get you a coffee?”

Evangelator: “You can go to church with me on Sunday.”

Student: (trying to think what to say) “I have something else to do that day.”

Evangelator: “But why can’t you come with me?”

Student: (getting up from the table and collecting his stuff) “Really I have to go. Thanks again.”

Evangelator: “But you have to come with me to church.”

Student: “Next time I’ll do the homework by myself.” (He rushes away)

(The Evangelator says to himself, “I must take bolder action.” He walks out and sees another student.)

Evangelator: “Hello, do you want to go to church?”

Student: “I have to run an errand.”

Evangelator: “But you must go to church.”

Student: “What’s your problem?”

Evangelator: (grabbing her) “You must come!”

Student: (breaks his grip and runs away)

(The Evangelator continues on and sees a young man.)

Evangelator: “You are coming to church with me.”

Young man: “What?”

Evangelator: “You must come.”

Young man: “I’m out of here.” (He runs away.)

(The Evangelator sends out a ray that zaps the young man.)

No, I don’t think any of us want to be a part of that at all. Yet what comes to mind when we hear about sharing the Gospel of Jesus with others?

Jesus didn’t just appear to the disciples alive on that Easter night. He also was getting them ready to go out and spread the news of His resurrection, so that others could believe.

In our culture we defend the right of people to have their own beliefs and opinions. We may not agree with them, but we want to stop those who would threaten them for those beliefs. In our effort to do that we emphasize that our beliefs are private. Each one of us believes what we want to believe. No one is forced to be a Christian, Moslem, or atheist. But that makes it very difficult to think of ourselves sharing our faith with other people. We don’t want people cramming their beliefs down our throats. Why would we want to be seen as being that way by others?

Jesus said to His disciples: *“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”*

Note He didn’t say, “Witness about Me,” but “You are witnesses.” In the books of Acts before Jesus leaves to ascend to heaven He tells the disciples. “You will be My witnesses.” The disciples saw Jesus risen from the dead. Jesus’ resurrection had a great effect on them, so great that they had to share it with others. But “witness” was not so much something the disciples did, but what they were.

“The Lutheran Witness” is a magazine sent out to Lutherans about Lutherans around the world. In February there was an article about Emmanuel

Lutheran Church in Baltimore. Years ago there were two Lutheran churches in Baltimore named Immanuel. They were distinguished by the fact that one used German and the other English. So they were called “German Immanuel” or “English Immanuel.” When they both got to using English, they were distinguished by calling one “Immanuel” and the other “Emmanuel.” Both churches moved from the inner city to outlying areas. They flourished and had strong schools. Then the city expanded to them. Both churches floundered. Emmanuel tried all kinds of programs with formal evangelism, but they didn’t work. Then they began to focus on the Gospel within them.

God calls us here to help us remember who we are more than what we should do. We are witnesses to what God has done for us. We see Him come into lives through Baptism. We hear His Word free us from sin. We celebrate His Easter victory as we share in Jesus’ supper. As we witness all of that, we will share it. It is who we are. And through that witness—as we befriend internationals, as we care for students, as we open our building to groups in the community, as we hold the hands of those who are ill, or in grief, or lonely—Jesus shows Himself to others.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
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