



April 4, 2021

Making Room for Early Christian Witness
Pastor Vern Christopherson

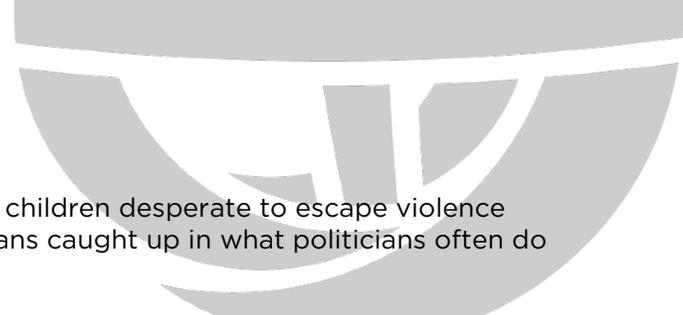
Luke 23:50—24:12 NSRV

⁵⁰Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, ⁵¹had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. ⁵²This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. ⁵⁴It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Wouldn't it be great if the women who came to the tomb that first Easter morning had had cell phones with an ability to record the whole event? Then we'd know how big that stone was, and what the women saw when they peered inside the tomb, and what those two mysterious men dressed in dazzling white were actually doing there. Easter would be so much easier to grasp, right? Faith would be easier to accept. The life of the world to come would make more sense.

I hardly need to say it, but cell phone recordings have given us a whole new perspective on the world in which we live. Sometimes those recordings are cute: puppies and kittens playing together, surprise birthday parties, lively Easter egg hunts. Sometimes they're a matter of great



significance: an angry mob storming our nation's capitol; children desperate to escape violence and poverty by streaming across the U.S. border; politicians caught up in what politicians often do best: double-talk.

Cell phone recordings are seemingly everywhere these days. Millions of people have watched the video of Derek Chauvin with his knee pressed on the neck of George Floyd. It's over 9 minutes long. Somewhere along the way, Floyd stopped resisting arrest and then he stopped breathing. The picture pretty much tells the story, right? It seems like an open and shut case. Why call witnesses? Most of us have already made up our minds. Don't you wonder how the court found enough impartial people to even form a jury?

Cell phone recording or not, we're having a trial. Trials are often conducted in a public place because what happens there is a public matter. That's what happened to Jesus on Friday, only in his case he had not one trial but two. The first was Jewish; the second Roman. The Sanhedrin – the Jewish high court – interrogated Jesus: “If you are the Messiah, our long-awaited king, tell us plainly.” Jesus wasn't the most cooperative witness: “If I tell you, you won't believe me.” Next, Jesus was brought before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. There were more accusations from the religious authorities: the rabbi from Galilee has been perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to Rome; claiming that he himself is the Messiah.” At first brush, Pilate said he found nothing deserving death. But then he got an idea. We're not the only ones who like to pass the buck. Pilate would send the Galilean rabbi to King Herod because that was Herod's jurisdiction. The only trouble was, Herod didn't find anything deserving death either.

If only they'd had some video footage, they could have gotten to the truth, right? After all, a trial is designed to get at the truth. We want to see it with our own eyes. Still, whether a video is 9 minutes or 9 seconds, it has to be set in context. That's what the law says. Witnesses have to be called to testify. The witnesses have seen something. They are called to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about what they have seen and heard.

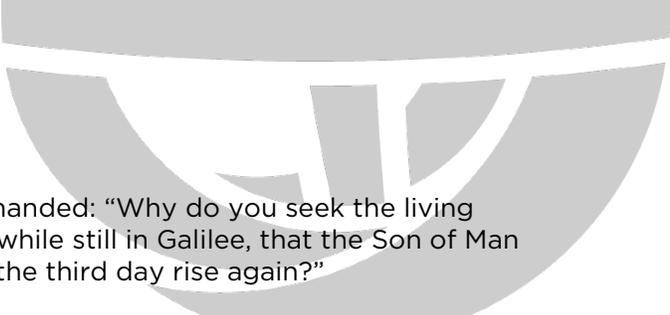
In the trial of Derek Chauvin, the prosecution has called a variety of people to come forward: an off duty EMT who'd been trained to help people in troubling situations; a clerk at the convenience store where George Floyd used a twenty-dollar bill in payment; a police lieutenant with decades of experience on the use of force; even a nine-year-old girl who said she felt sad and kind of mad by what she saw. Perhaps you've heard some of the testimony. Cell phone recordings or not, minds are made up or not, the court often has access to the truth only through witnesses.

Clearly, the witnesses in the George Floyd case are not simply neutral observers. Many of them have been traumatized by what they experienced that day. Tears well up in their eyes as they recall the events. Even so, we sense that the truth is larger than any one witness's experience of it. After all, some of the witnesses will prove more trustworthy than others.

The women who came to the tomb that first Easter morning were not neutral observers either. They'd been with Jesus ever since his days in Galilee. In a male-dominated culture, the women weren't part of the Twelve per se, but they had provided for the Twelve out of their financial resources. They'd listened to Jesus' teachings, and felt the power of his love and compassion. They'd been moved to drop everything and follow him. And on Friday, after the Twelve had scattered and fled, the women looked on as Jesus' body was wrapped in a linen cloth and laid inside a rock-hewn tomb. I imagine their hearts were broken. They struggled to make sense of the tragic events and how things had gone so terribly wrong.



The women brought spices to care for Jesus' bruised and battered body. They were surprised to find the stone rolled away. They had the courage to look inside. Suddenly they were terrified by two men dressed in dazzling white. Perhaps they were seeing a vision of angels. The women



bowed their faces to the ground. They were mildly reprimanded: “Why do you seek the living among the dead? Don’t you remember what he told you while still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?”

A light went on for the women. They remembered. They hurried off to tell the other disciples what they’d seen and heard. Why is this important? Because Jesus had shared these predictions with only his inner circle of disciples. That means there were women in the room when he shared them. That means the women were disciples too. And now, having heard from the angels, they were qualified to tell others of what they had seen and heard.

Notice another little detail in Luke’s story. The women were not instructed to go and tell the Eleven. In other words, they were not running an errand. They made this decision on their own. For anyone in a work-a-day world, there’s often a big difference between taking initiative and waiting for instruction on what to do next. This was a big job! The women were up to it! Luke finally names them: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them.

In no time at all, these women became the first witnesses to the good news of Easter. Again, they were not neutral observers, and they didn’t pretend to be. And again, the truth was larger than anyone’s own experience of it. They didn’t have much to go on – no cell phone video – only an empty tomb and a vision of angels and a few words of Jesus from back in Galilee. It was only a glimpse. The Eleven dismiss their story as an idle tale. Only Peter runs to the tomb to check it out for himself. At this point, any hope of Easter is hanging by a slender thread.

It’s worth noting: despite the two trials of Friday, this is not a court of law. As much as we might want to get at the truth, matters of faith are never finally proven, nor is faith generated by an unquestionable argument. No, faith is communicated by witness. And for the time being, the only witness we have to go on is that of the women. And really, it is only a glimpse.

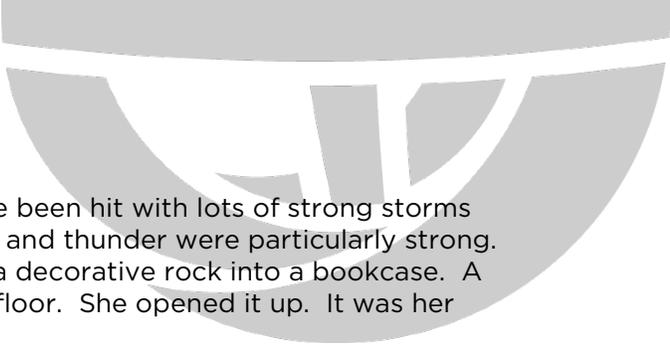
Is a glimpse enough for you? Let me tell you a story. Matt Lackore died quite tragically on June 29 of this past year. Matt had suffered from depression for a long time. A classic definition of depression is anger turned inward. Matt wasn’t always comfortable in his own skin. Add job changes to that, and challenges at home, and suddenly depression took on a life of its own.

Depression is often not simply an isolated episode but an ongoing condition, indeed, an insidious disease. Matt was taking anti-depressants. He spent time in treatment programs. If you or a loved one have ever been there, then you know just how hard the struggle can be. A person can spiral further and further down. You might end up at the point – much like Matt – where you’re tempted to say: “Only God can make me whole.” And sadly, that long-sought wholeness is not always on this side of the grave.

So, on one very sad day in June, Matt took his life. Suddenly this gifted, precocious child of God, who’d been able to fix almost anything with his hands, could not fix himself. And despite all the medication and treatment and prayers and encouragement, the weariness became too much, the storm too strong. Matt came to the conclusion, “Only God can make me whole.”

Before Matt carried through with this, he wrote a series of notes to his family. Many of them came with a familiar refrain. To son Aaron he wrote, “I’ll love you forever.” To daughter Norah he wrote, “I’ll love you forever.” To dad Steve he wrote, “I’ll love you forever.” To mom Lois he wrote, “I’ll love you forever.” But there was one note conspicuously absent – to sister Sarah. And for the last several months, Sarah has agonized about this: “Why didn’t I get one?”





Sarah lives in Nashville. Perhaps you've heard that they've been hit with lots of strong storms over the last few weeks. During one storm, the lightening and thunder were particularly strong. Their house shook. A picture fell off the wall. It knocked a decorative rock into a bookcase. A while later, Sarah came into the room. A book lay on the floor. She opened it up. It was her favorite book children's book, "Love you forever."

Was this merely a coincidence? I don't think so. It was a little glimpse of the life of the world to come, a witness of things beyond our understanding. We need that witness. In speaking of those who've gone before us in the faith, the book of Hebrews puts it like this: "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

Friends, we live on glimpses, but we long for more. From time to time, a witness or two comes forth and tells us the truth. This life of ours is not an open and shut case. There's more to the story. God's redeeming love is loose in the world, working as hard as can be to make us whole, both in this life and the next.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

