

**Who will tell the story?**  
**Luke 24:36-38, Easter 3, Year B**  
**26 April 2009**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

I was always captivated by my Uncle Bill. He was my grandmother's brother. I didn't see Uncle Bill very often, usually only at our bi-annual family reunions. By the time I knew him, Bill was older, but to me he was dashing. He walked with a swagger, and his grin and humor always seemed to make my aunts pause and swoon just a little bit. At those reunions relatives told me the story of Uncle Bill's service in World War II. He'd been in the navy, and due to his personal heroism when his ship had been torpedoed, he'd been given a battlefield commission. It was easy to believe every detail of the story as I looked at the figure Uncle Bill cut, sitting at the edge of the lake with his arms draped easily on his knees. I hadn't thought about the story for decades until this week, and I called my mother to hear it again.

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In Luke today, the disciples are huddled together on Easter evening or perhaps the following day. The prevailing emotions among them, we gather from this account and similar ones in the other Gospels, are hazy confusion and fear. What is known for sure is that on Easter morning Jesus was missing from the tomb where he'd been laid. Stories about this have spread like wildfire in Jerusalem. Some have claimed his body was stolen. Others traffic in more bizarre tales: that Jesus' ghost walks about Jerusalem. A few of these gathered have had other experiences. Two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus broke bread with a man who revealed himself to be the same Jesus they'd seen crucified, and Peter claims Jesus, very much alive, appeared to him too. But while the stories of body theft and ghostly apparition are spreading along the streets, these other stories of a risen Jesus are whispered only among the few huddled in this room. The disciples are not sharing their story with the world outside. It is going untold.

Then Jesus appears among them. He offers peace, but notice what happens next. Despite the fact that their ears are still warm with the news from Peter and the Emmaus road, the disciples' first reaction is the belief that they are seeing a ghost. Even they fall prey to the stories they've heard on the streets.

In response Jesus tells them the true story. First in action, he beckons them to touch his flesh. He shows them the still-present wounds in his hands and his feet. His stomach growls, and he asks for food. He eats.

All of this is to underscore that Jesus is really, tangibly, physically, *alive*. He is not memory. He is not merely some abiding principle of goodness. He is not an ethereal spirit who slips through the disciples' fingers. He is a person through whose eyes God is seen and through whose wounds God is bound to the disciples forever.

Jesus' story is one of flesh and blood, of God met in a real person and subsequently in real people. It is story of God's presence being found when we—like Jesus—are wounded and when we touch the lives of the wounded, when we—like Jesus—are hungry and when we offer the hungry something to abate their pangs.

Jesus' story is one of repentance and forgiveness, he tells them, of the peace he offers, peace that comes from turning from an old, painful, and futile life toward one found in the God who offers a better way.

But the most important thing Jesus says is the final thing. "Starting in the streets of Jerusalem," he tells the disciples, "You must proclaim these things. You must tell this story. You are the witnesses."

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"Tell me the story about Uncle Bill's ship in the War," I said when my mother answered the phone.

"What?" she asked. "Uncle Bill," I went on, "...the way his ship was sunk in the Pacific, how he saved the sailors from the water..."

"Um, that's not the story," my mother responded as she gathered herself. "Your Uncle Bill wasn't in the navy. He served in the army, in Europe not the Pacific."

My head began to swim, and an odd sense of panic slowly rose in me. "No," I countered, "That's not right. I remember the story from our family reunions."

"Uncle *Bob* was in the navy," my mom went on, "I'm pretty sure *he* had a ship shot out from under *him*. Could that be it?"

I never knew my Uncle Bob, Bill's younger brother. He'd died before I was born. Clearly my intermittent nostalgic images of my Uncle Bill were inaccurate. My mistaken memory and my mother's partial one combined to form an oozy recollection that felt as if it were slipping through my fingers as we spoke. Because the story had gone untold for so long, the contours of its truth had been distorted. I don't know the story anymore. No one does. My grandmother's generation is gone, and the story is lost.

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The disciples huddled in that room are afraid to tell the story of Jesus. Their friends and loved ones already think they're crazy for putting faith in a rabble-rouser bound for the cross. Only by running away from Jesus on Maundy Thursday did they likely escape punishment themselves. Now to claim that Jesus is alive would mean more derision and renewed personal risk.

But there is danger in them not speaking as well, and that danger is a two-headed beast. First, in the void left by their silence, other stories of Jesus *are* being told, stories that distort the reality they have experienced, stories that tell of a Jesus who is nothing like the living God they meet in the man standing before them. Second, silence breeds amnesia. Like solid stone washed slowly away by a river, even the most potent experiences are diminished by the relentless passage of time. What was once powerful and clear becomes hazy and muddled unless the story is repeatedly told.

The same dangers face us. *We*—the Episcopalians in this room and standing in this pulpit—are loath to tell the story of the God we meet in Jesus. We, like the disciples, are fearful and unsure. When we experience Jesus in our lives we recoil from naming him out loud in the streets. And over time, we forget to name him even in our hearts. Meanwhile, there are plenty of others who readily name Jesus. My days are punctuated by conversations with those who tell me about the Jesus that they've heard about through churches, books, talking heads in the media, peddlers who stop at their front doors. It never ceases to amaze me the different stories of Jesus that are told. Sometimes Jesus is presented as the founder of a religion that is the root of all mischief and evil in the world. Other times he is presented benignly as only a wise teacher (someone like Confucius) who has left us a formula for compassionate living. And yet other times he is presented as so like God but so *unlike* us that he floats an inch or two above the ground. (Indeed, I've seen a Jesus action figure that does exactly that, rolling along on tiny castors.)

I don't know any of these Jesuses. And when I encounter people whose lives have been so distressed, confused, or dismayed by the stories of Jesus they've been told, two things happen. First, I experience embarrassment and something approaching shame that I haven't shared the Jesus I do know. And second, when I fumblingly try, I find that my depiction of the Jesus who saves me is as muddled as my memory of my Uncle Bill.

Blessedly, there is grace. Luke ends his Gospel never resolving the disciples' uncertainty and fear. Even *as they touch the flesh* of the risen Jesus, they struggle with wonder and disbelief. And even so, Jesus commissions them as witnesses to him. He gives them the charge, not absent

their uncertainty but in the midst of it, to go out and proclaim him as the God who meets us in the concrete realities of our lives, offering forgiveness for our faults and flaws (even the worst of them) and granting life from the ashes to those who will follow him.

The disciples' story will continue, and what they'll find is that *in* the witnessing, *in* touching the lives of the wounded, *in* feeding spiritual and physical hunger, they gain power and strength. The Spirit of God increases in them. In that we have to trust. And in their steps, even in our fumbling doubt and fear, we have to follow. We—we *Episcopalians*, God's "frozen chosen"—are witnesses of the resurrected Jesus. Say that to yourself every day. *We* meet the living God in our lives, and not as a vague memory or an ethereal ghost.

We meet him in our moments of pain, when through the solidarity of his own wounds he strengthens us.

We meet him in moments of repentance, when he reveals new vistas and a better road for us to travel in our lives.

We meet him in our encounters with one another, when we share sustenance, joy, and love.

We meet him those moments of felt assurance that in neither life nor death are we ever alone, because he is the Son of God who has claimed us as children of God.

We meet him. We must name him. And we must tell the story.

*Amen.*