May 11-12, 2013
THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Weeks have passed since grief-weary women, Peter and the beloved disciple discovered the empty tomb. That very day, the risen Lord appeared to the apostles who huddled in fear behind closed doors. From that moment until the ascension of the Lord we celebrate today, the risen One appeared to his disciples many times. At each of those moments, he tells them they will become his presence in the world, witnesses of his life, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Because Jesus died and rose again, we who call him “Lord” have a story only those who have experienced his risen life can share.

The ascension of the Lord was a glorious, moving moment in the life of those first disciples. In many ways, it was a time of great sorrow and loss as they witnessed their Master and Friend rise from their presence into the fullness of the presence of God. What would become of them? To whom would they now turn for
guidance? How would they continue the work the Lord had begun among them? Who, if anyone, would believe them? These were but a few of the questions bubbling up between and among them.

Yes, the ascension of the Lord is a story with more than a few special effects. There is a vision of angels, clouds receiving the Lord in the air, and then nothing but silence as they gaze into heaven, wondering what all they had seen and felt and heard meant. Then an angel speaks, reminding them that they are witnesses of the crucified and risen Lord. The angel’s message echoes our Lord’s command: they were to be witnesses of his life and his love to everyone they met beginning in Jerusalem and then, to the far reaches of the earth.

The risen Lord’s charge to them is ours too. We are witnesses of God’s love given us in Jesus Christ in whose life we learn the way of love is God’s way for us all. We are witnesses who have a simple story to tell: we are all created in God’s image,
marred by sin, broken by life’s struggles, but lavishly loved and freely forgiven. *We are witnesses* that in Jesus Christ, God visited earth as a human being to show us the only way another person can experience God’s love is through another human being who loves as Christ has loved.

What does it mean to be a Christian *witness* in this world so loved by God? At the very beginning, we must define what a witness is, what a witness does, and why a witness is so very important.

- A witness, by definition, is a person who has first-hand experience of something they relate to another. A witness does not share hearsay or gossip or report what others feel about an experience, no matter how significant it may be. The only person who qualifies as a witness is a person who has a personal, sensory experience of what is related.
That said, a witness tells, shows or demonstrates what he or she has seen and experienced. In a court of law, a witness testifies or tells what was seen, heard, felt, tasted, or touched. Such firsthand telling of an event helps the court and a jury come to some conclusion – call it a verdict – as to the guilt or innocence of a defendant or the truth or falsehood of a claim.

A Christian witness – someone very ordinary like you and me – is a person who is able to say from firsthand experience that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord. A Christian witness is anyone in whose life Christ has come to live by God’s Spirit. A Christian witness knows God forgives our sins because they have experienced God’s forgiving grace. A Christian witness believes God hears and answers prayer because they pray and experience the presence of God in their lives. A Christian witness is someone who has not just read about Jesus Christ, but someone who knows Jesus Christ and the way of life Christ calls us to embrace.
When Peter, James, John, Mary Magdalene, our Lord’s mother, and the other disciples found themselves looking up into heaven, the only response they could make that made sense was to become tellers of the one story that had changed their lives. Jesus Christ who called them to follow, who died on the cross, who rose from the grave, was their Savior and Lord. They told his story because they had experienced his life and his love and his grace in their lives and among their fellowship.

When all is said and done in our lives, the only story we have to tell is the story of God’s saving, forgiving, nourishing grace. When sin left us broken and spiritually dead, the risen Lord raised us up and gave us a new beginning. We can say with Paul that in Christ, we have come “to know the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.” In Christ, God has done and is doing in all of our lives the work of salvation. And we
are witnesses of that work who can tell that story because it is the only story worth telling.

From time to time, we all meet a person at work or in the neighborhood or even in our family who have lost their way. “I just don’t know what I’m going to do” is a common expression of futility and emptiness all of us feel at some time in our lives. When you hear that said (or when you feel it deep down in your own soul), what if you could find the words to say in your own way, “Jesus Christ can help you cope with the ‘whatever it is’ that troubles you.” Any time you put your arms around someone and tell them by God’s grace they are going to be all right, you are being a witness to God’s presence and power.

Herein is the wonderful mystery of the Christian faith that sparkles like a diamond on the Sunday we remember the ascension of the Lord. When he was lifted from the earth to return to the Father, he placed in our hands this witnessing responsibility that,
when used as God would use it best, finds us bearing our witness of God’s grace to someone who needs a little hope or a simple expression of compassion.

Being God’s witness has nothing to do with being a preacher, a priest, or a person with a phonebook full of answers. When you think about it, we witness best and most effectively when we simply tell another person that God’s grace will see them through the darkest night, even when they think, as those first disciples did, that even God has left them. This week, don’t spend much time looking up to heaven hoping Christ will come back. Rather, spend some time looking around for just one opportunity to be a witness for Christ who is among us in wondrous love.