

THE SUBPOENA

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Acts 3:12-19; Luke 24:36b-48

“You are witnesses of these things.”

Luke 24:48

If you’ve been paying any attention to the news, you’ve surely noticed there’s a big investigation going on in Washington. Has been for many months. One of the words that comes up again and again, as the media tries to puzzle out what Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s up to, is the word “subpoena.”

Specifically, the reporters are wondering which government officials are going to receive subpoenas: a summons from a judge to come testify in court.

I just found out where the word “subpoena” comes from. (Thank you, Google Search.) It’s a Latin term that literally means “under penalty.” Back when legal documents were written in Latin, the first words on one of these invitations from the court were “Sub poena...” Under penalty of law... People involved in the legal system took to calling these messages by the first two words, as a sort of shorthand, and a new English word was born.

Did you catch the subpoena in today’s Gospel reading?

“You are witnesses of these things” is what the risen Christ says to his

disciples. He's commanding them to speak of what they have heard and seen.

In the Gospel of Luke, this passage appears just after the famous story of the Road to Emmaus — when two disciples of Jesus, one named Cleopas and another who is unnamed — encounter Jesus along the road. But they don't know it *is* Jesus — not just yet. Not until they've invited him to their place for dinner, and as this stranger is breaking the bread, “their eyes are opened and they recognize him.”

Their eyes are opened. They see. They become eyewitnesses. Then, abruptly, he vanishes from their sight.

The next scene in Luke's Gospel is the one we read together this morning. Cleopas and his companion are doing exactly what witnesses are supposed to do. They're explaining to the other disciples all about their encounter along the road.

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That's what the two were saying to one another right after Jesus left them, and they've probably just finished saying something very similar to the others, when — wonder of wonders — there Jesus is again, right in the room where they've been meeting!

All this appearing and disappearing is getting to be a bit much for them. Luke says, “They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.”

So Jesus reassures them. He does two things, to show them he is no disembodied spirit. First, he shows them his hands and feet. “Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”

Then, he asks them for something to eat. “They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.”

I’ve always found the specificity of that line to be fascinating. Luke doesn’t just say, “So they gave him some lunch.” No, it’s “a piece of broiled fish.” A little detail that has no importance with respect to the larger story, but is just the sort of thing an eyewitness might remember.

Then, the risen Lord goes on to teach them of prophecies in scripture. and suddenly it all makes sense: his life, his death, the strange rumors of resurrection. Everything falls into place, in one of those glorious epiphanies that sometimes burst in upon our lives: unasked, unbidden.

Then there’s the kicker. Jesus says to them, “You are witnesses of these things.” He doesn’t say, “I’m recruiting a few good witnesses to go out and tell this story, maybe some of you would like to apply for the job.” No, he simply says, “You *are* witnesses.” No debate. No argument. You simply *are*.

Jesus has just issued them a subpoena.

The Greek word for “witness” is one you’ll all recognize. It’s the word *martyres*: martyrs.

Now, in today’s English, martyrs are those who courageously and very publicly sacrifice their lives for what they believe in. The annals of the early church are replete with stories of courageous believers who gave up their lives rather than renounce their faith in Christ. The first martyr in the scriptures is the Apostle Stephen, who — as the Book of Acts tells us — was stoned to death. The letter to the Hebrews rattles off a list of those who suffered mightily — and triumphantly — for their faith:

“Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — of whom the world was not worthy.” [11:35-38]

The early church placed great value on what those courageous disciples did. Unlike the sort of witnesses who sit in court and just say a lot of words, these witnesses — these martyrs — testified to their faith by how they lived: and how they died.

But that’s not what Jesus is commanding the disciples to do. Many of them, of course, would become martyrs as we understand the word, but right here he’s

just using the word in the ordinary sense. “You are witnesses. *Eyewitnesses*. These things you have seen, you can never un-see. And I am counting on you to tell others about them.”

Yet, this subpoena of our Lord’s — this summons to be witnesses — is not limited to eyewitnesses. The last eyewitness to the resurrection died off two millennia ago: but the witness of Christ’s church continues.

It continues through you and through me. We are not *eyewitnesses*: how could we be? We didn’t encounter him along the Emmaus Road. We weren’t in that closed room to see him display his hands and feet, and eat that piece of broiled fish.

No, I think, in you and me, our Lord is looking for a different sort of witness. He’s looking for us to be not eyewitnesses, but character witnesses.

That sort of witness sometimes has a role to play in court cases. If defense attorneys are angling to undermine the prosecutor’s argument, they’re likely to call one or more character witnesses: people who know the defendant well, who are willing to vouch for that person, to observe how unlikely it is that their esteemed friend or colleague would ever commit a crime.

That’s the kind of witnesses you and I are called to be for Christ: character

witnesses. We can't tell firsthand stories about the resurrection — other than the timeworn, smooth-as-a-piece-of-beach-glass accounts that have been passed down through the generations. But we *can* witness to a personal Christ, a living Lord whom we know, one who has touched our lives and made a difference.

Most people out there have heard the basic outline of the Easter story. They know Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Romans, and that he's reputed to have come back from the dead. I don't think you or I or anybody else can improve on the details of that story, as we retell it to others.

It's not the story, as a mere historical account, though, that brings people to faith. It's a different sort of story — a different sort of witness — that does that.

Think of the people who first taught *you* the faith. Did they have a novelist's gift for vividly retelling stories from the Bible, a journalist's precision in relating all the details, a detective's persistence in assembling pieces of corroborating evidence?

They may have demonstrated some of those talents, but I seriously doubt if any of those abilities was what really made the difference for you: that convinced you Jesus Christ is a Lord worth following. No, it was something else. Something very, very personal. Something about the way their Christian faith had become integrated with who they were.

That something was *relationship*: the living relationship they had with the Risen Lord. Whether in word or deed, or some combination of both, they opened up to you the deep and abiding joy of that relationship, and let it be known that you could have that sort of relationship too. There was something about their lives that made them character witnesses to Jesus: simply by knowing them, you could come to know something of him.

You're going to hear more from Elise in a little while about the sort of things that happen at our Presbyterian Camp Johnsonburg. On one level, it's a summer camp like any other: a dining hall, a lake with boats, a collection of cabins where kids live for a week with their college-age counselors. There are games, songs, crafts, nature walks, a climbing wall, a zip line — everything you'd expect to be present at a first-rate summer camp for kids.

But what makes Johnsonburg such a treasure is that it's a place where Christian witness happens. Not in a hard-sell, high-pressure kind of way — but in any one of a number of winsome, one-on-one or small group encounters, in which the name of Jesus is simply a part of everyday conversation. When you meet someone who knows the Risen Lord, you want to know him too. It's as simple as that.

That's a rare thing these days, outside of the church — or outside of a place

like Johnsonburg, which after all is just the church, in a different setting. When things are happening there as they're meant to happen, kids will come back from a week of camp saying to themselves and others, "Did not our hearts burn within us?" OK, they may not use those exact words, but you know what I'm talking about. Christian witness happens through relationship.

This personal character of Christian witness is captured in a little parable told by the English philosopher Basil Mitchell.

In wartime, in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger, who deeply impresses him. The two men talk into the wee hours of the morning: of life and death, of the struggle for justice, of the things that need to happen to make their country free again. Finally the stranger admits to the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance and not only that, he is its commander. He urges the underground fighter to have faith in him no matter what happens.

The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the strange's sincerity and constancy, and decides that he will trust him.

The two men never have a conversation again. But from time to time, the partisan glimpses the stranger from afar. Sometimes he sees him helping members

of the resistance. Then he is grateful, saying to his friends, "He is on our side."

Sometimes the partisan sees the stranger in the uniform of the police, handing over patriots to the occupying power. On such occasions his friends complain that he is no good: but the partisan still affirms, "He is on our side." The partisan still believes that, in spite of all appearances, the stranger did not deceive him.

Sometimes he sends word to the stranger for help, and receives it. Then he's thankful. Other times he asks for aid, and does not receive it. Then he observes, "The Stranger knows best." Sometimes his friends demand in exasperation, "Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you're wrong, that he's not on our side after all?"

Always the partisan declines to answer. He has no desire to put the stranger to the test: because he has come to know him. Because he is in relationship.

It's a parable of faith. At its very center is the whole notion of witness: of what it means to be a character witness, to one we know personally.

The world will try, from time to time, to assail our Christian faith. It will declare that God is not on our side: that life — in the words of the grim seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes — is "nasty, brutish and short." and that there is no life beyond this one. The world will endeavor to convince us,

from time to time, that Jesus did not rise from the dead, that there is no power in this world beyond the orderly forces of nature — gravity and muscle, magnetism and electricity, and the orderly decay of atoms. The world will try its hardest to win us over to the view that the rush of joy that “strangely warms” our hearts is not the work of the Holy Spirit, but a mere projection of our inner, most cherished fantasies.

In times of trial, you and I can join the partisan in the parable, in recalling our own encounters with the “stranger” — for we continue in relationship with him. He calls us to be his character witnesses, “martyrs” in the most ancient sense: to speak not so much of proofs, or evidence, but rather of the Lord we know, and the difference he has made to us. It’s not the mind that Christian witness touches, so much as it is the heart.

So, allow me to serve you with the subpoena: “You are witnesses of these things.” As an I. When we find ourselves on the witness stand, called to “make an accounting of the hope that is in us,” as First Peter says, what will we think of to say? And more importantly, what will we have the courage to do?

Let us pray:

We give you thanks, O Lord,

**for the testimony we have received from others, over the years:
for word, and deed, and most importantly, relationship.
Allow us never to forget
the power of such relationships
to teach of divine love in ways mere words can never do.
And we pray that you would use our own relationships
to communicate good news
to a world that hungers to hear it. Amen.**

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