

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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Witnesses
John 20:19-31, Acts 5:27-32

Do any of you feel that Thomas got a bad rap as “Doubting Thomas?” The other disciples got to see the Jesus’ wounds after they forgot he said he would rise. Thomas says, “I won’t believe unless I see Jesus too.” Makes sense to me! Yet, Jesus tells the disciples that people who believe without seeing will be blessed. Does that mean we have to simply believe blindly that God transforms the world?

Those who lived with and saw Jesus before and after resurrection were blessed by Jesus’ presence. But the writer John wrote to people who were not witnesses to Jesus in the flesh. It is reasonable to imagine that they doubted that they could be “real” disciples if they never encountered the living Jesus.

Scholars believe John wrote between 50 and 70 years after Jesus’ resurrection. How comforting for John’s audience to hear; you do not need to have been one of the original disciples, or taught by Jesus directly, or to have to have been one who touched the wounds in his hands. If you believe without all these things, you too are blessed, you too are a disciple. Even if you missed out on the living Jesus, you can still experience God through the

living Christ and the Holy Spirit. This is comforting for us too. We are also blessed, disciples of Jesus, the Christ. But what does this mean?

The people who followed Jesus experienced something that was life transforming. There can be no denying that, or we would not be here. They witnessed something with their eyes, ears, physical senses, or perhaps instead their minds, hearts, and souls that spoke to them of hope and possibility in the midst of despair. That spoke of God's transformation of the world.

And Jesus commissioned them to go and share that experience with others. "As the Father has sent me, I send you." "Now that you have seen and witnessed with the eyes of your soul, go and tell the world, go and witness to others." So, if we truly are disciples of Jesus, then we have been commissioned and sent too.

But before we can tell the world we must know what it is we have witnessed. With Jesus, the disciples witnessed the love and compassion of God in such a way through Jesus, their lives were transformed completely. What is it that we have seen and understand?

Many people yearn for a mountaintop experience of God; a lightening bolt out of the blue, or a calm serenity that comes in the midst of fear, or a presence that makes goose bumps stand up on our arms. It can be natural to

wonder what it would be like to hear the sound of God's voice. Have you had an experience in which you felt the presence of God or that proved to you without a doubt that God exists? Or is your experience of the Holy more obscure, coming in a quiet "knowing" that defies description? Or perhaps you do not relate to this experiencing God at all. Perhaps for you, being here in church is a witness to a life well lived without any religious "hocus pocus." It is all good. It is all right. For God comes to each of us as we need. As unique and special creations of the one we call Creator, we exist in our own way and time.

Yet there is something of the Creator in us which cannot be stilled or stilled. Something that like spring, bursts out from our lives. Something that keeps happening. Hope in the midst of despair.

I would like to tell you a story where I saw God, and saw others experience God and find hope in the midst of impossible despair. It happened on a trip to Israel, Palestine and Jordan with an interfaith group. Two of the leaders of the group were estranged from each other. One, a Rabbi, trained in Israel, deeply steeped in his tradition. He had been in Israel when a Palestinian terrorist murdered a school bus of Jewish children. Bernie founded and named a synagogue in memory of them. I would venture to say he harbored hate for all Palestinians.

The second was Haitham. Haitham is a Muslim Palestinian refugee. Two of his brothers were murdered by Israeli soldiers. His entire village was razed; he watched them destroy his home, place of worship, and the cemetery where his brothers were buried. His family fled to a refugee camp and now are scattered all over the world. I would venture to say Haitham felt hate for Jewish people.

When the trip began, Bernie and Haitham would not look at, talk to or even stand near each other. They rode on separate buses. During the trip we visited the graves of the children who were murdered. Haitham, moved to tears, asked to speak to us. He told us that his religion, not only did not condone this violence against innocents but condemned the murderer to hell for eternity. He told us that nothing could ever excuse this crime. He apologized to of us for the acts of someone who claimed to be following his religion.

This was one of many situations that happened to break down the walls between Haitham and Bernie. Another was when we arrived at where Haitham believed his village might be. He attempted to leave the group, alone, to go to try to find the graves of his brothers. Bernie insisted on going with him. We watched with trepidation, as these two enemies set off alone together, without the buffer of the group, with grim and determined faces.

But when they caught up with us, hours later, we met not two enemies with clear animosity between them, not two strangers tolerating each other, but brothers, walking arm in arm. Laughing and smiling, talking together. They never found the graves. But with tears streaming, Haitham told us that Bernie had said to him, “my people took your brothers from you. Now I will be your brother.”

The transformation that took place between these two men was nothing compared to the transformation that took place with in these two men. But there is more to the story. When we went to Jordan, we were feasted at a restaurant by Haitham. It was a wonderful family place with family, friends, community working there, serving us, with incredible hospitality; a great meal, a great time.

But when we went to leave the restaurant and Haitham went to pay, the owner first raised the price 100 percent! Then he practically threw Haitham out. It turned out that he was also a Palestinian refugee. We were in the restaurant of a family, a community of people who had lost their homes and family. Haitham had brought the enemy into the restaurant. Haitham tried to explain the transformation that had taken place in his life, but the owner would not listen.

Haitham left terribly hurt and despairing. The Rabbi's wife, Barbara asked what had happened. Haitham told her, and asked her to leave it alone. But she would not, could not. She grabbed Bernie's hand and started to drag him back in the restaurant. Bernie told her that this was not only a bad idea, but that it could result in violence, even death. Barbara turned and looked at him and said, "it is for this exact moment that we have been sent on this trip by God."

The three went in and approached the owner who refused to speak English, or even look at Bernie. Haitham pleaded with the owner to no avail. Then, Bernie, with absolute fear cancelled out by absolute faith, took the hands of the owner and said, "when I look into your eyes, I see the face of God."

To say the transformation that occurred was miraculous would be to trivialize it. It was a moment where people allowed themselves to lower their barriers so that God could be experienced, it was a moment when hope overcame despair, the kingdom of heaven on earth. I witnessed it with my eyes and heart, and I witness it to you. God can overcome even the deepest despair and hatred.

Jesus gave the disciples the power to forgive sins, but this was supposed to be only a function of the temple. By transferring the

responsibility to his disciples, to us, Jesus freed the transformative power of God from the shackles of religion, place, time, or people who would limit God. When the first disciples were arrested for teaching in Jesus' name, their defense was that they had to obey God. They testified to their experience of God in their life with Jesus, the Christ. They told the high priest "we are witnesses to what happened, and so is the Holy Spirit. So what we witnessed must be witnessed to, it cannot be denied."

Now we are the witnesses to the transformative power of God. Now we have the power to forgive sins and to free people from the shackles that our world places on them. From the judgment that some are not worthy before God- those who are different, to the broken structures of society that keep people poor, homeless, and dying physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Those who have believed even without seeing are blessed. But we have seen. And belief is not an opinion about something. Belief is trust, to be loyal to, to bond with, to live our lives informed by, to live our lives transformed by.

We have witnessed this transformation. Let us go and be witnesses and transform the world.