

Luke 24:36-49 ³⁶ While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." ⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence. ⁴⁴ He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

"You Are Witnesses"

Lee Hammons was born in 1886 and died in 1980. I know of him only from stories told by Dwight Diller who taught me the banjo. Lee was a local musician in Marlinton, WV. People called on him to play banjo and fiddle for local occasions. But after radio came on the scene people didn't want to hear the old music, their music, anymore. They wanted to hear what was on the radio and Lee refused to comply. For that reason, in 1923 he got rid of his banjo and didn't have one until Dwight Diller came around in the late 1960's and somehow got Mr. Hammons to play again. Lee only remembered a few of the tunes he used to know. His signature piece on the banjo was a tune called *Walking in the Parlour*. I will play it now for you and keep in mind that this song was recorded after over 65 years of being without a banjo.

You folks are now witnesses to Mr. Hammons and his song. The greed of radio and human fickleness almost guaranteed that this man and the songs he knew would be forgotten. Consequently, after encountering his music and his story I have become a disciple of the music of the Hammons' family and Lee Hammons. I've never heard music that intrigues me the way theirs does.

Because of what I have just done, you are now witnesses. You have heard of Mr. Hammons and you have heard his song. You have heard his story of how he was betrayed by his own because they loved what was bigger, better, faster; what was other than who they were. You also know that his legacy lives on. So, what are you going to do now that you have experienced the Hammons' legacy and know your own complacency with the big, greedy business that left him all but forgotten? Are you going to continue to engross yourselves in popular music or learn to play the banjo and carry forth the legacy?

Well, I hope you have begun to sense the analogy that I have been constructing. Jesus' told his disciples that we are witnesses to certain things just as we are now witnesses to things pertaining to Lee Hammons. We are

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witnesses to the suffering and resurrection of the Christ and that repentance and the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations; things which the Scriptures foretold. Unfortunately, being a witness in the Christian sense is something most Christians feel uncomfortable about. Sharing the Christian faith is a difficult thing to do in these days when people view all things religious as private matters and anyone who openly shares faith is a bit fanatical or, worse, a member of a cult like the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormon's, or worse, a minister of a church – eew. Still, we are Jesus' witnesses and he has given us some particular things to give testimony to.

First, the Christ suffered. This is early church code-speak for saying that God has suffered just as we do. God has done this by means of God the Son becoming human as Jesus of Nazareth. The implication of this is that God is not some far off, uninvolved divine something-or-other who created everything and stepped back leaving us to ourselves to get it right with him in such a way as that when we die we'll pass his judgment of us. That's not the way the Trinity is. The Triune God of grace chooses to get involved in his Creation and in even the worst of human situations. God suffers with us. He's not a miracle worker who fixes everything. That will happen when all Creation is made new, but for now, God suffers with us and works all things to the good for those who love him and; by kindness leads people to repentance.

The second thing we are witnesses to is resurrection. Death is not the end, and since God has raised Jesus from the dead, New Creation has begun and we are to strive for it. Indeed, seek ye first the Kingdom of God. Last Wednesday at the Earth Day event we hosted, the organizers gave me the opportunity to make some closing remarks. I had thought of something beforehand, but the whole evening I was troubled that what I had planned to say wasn't what I was supposed to say. To fill you in, and I do wish more Claude folk had been there, we had a rather good evening listening to Margaret Atwood's modern day remake of Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. Her point was that humanity needs to stop being so greedy and lazy and wake-up or we will destroy ourselves. It fascinates me how the environmentalist message has taken the course of the Bible-thumping stump preacher – reduce everything down to being a problem of morals and then tell everybody if they don't make the right decisions to get themselves saved they'll wind up creating a hell for themselves. But anyway, I stood in this pulpit and told them about the hope of Easter, about resurrection and how the God who created this beautiful world and called it very good loves us and the Creation enough not to let death and destruction be the final say. He will make all things new and we will be raised from the dead. Yet, that does not let us off the hook so that we can continue on the way we are. We are those who know Jesus lives and that hope not fear is the better message and the better motivator to bring about change.

We are also witnesses to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. I'm not Jesus or the Holy Spirit, but I would have reversed the word order on that. We do not repent so that we have forgiveness of sins. Rather, because of what God has done for us in, through, and as Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness of sins and therefore we repent. Last week I spoke a bit about how forgiveness means

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our sins have been let go and if you remember I pontificated about the Old Testament Day of Atonement, when sins were once and for all dealt with in the Israelite community for that year. The day culminated with the priest whispering the sins of the people into the ear of a goat that was led into the wilderness and released to be destroyed by whatever was out there. That's what Jesus has done for humanity; he's born our sins away so that like that scapegoat they have been let go to be destroyed. Since that is the case we are to repent, to turn to God, to begin to be minded according to the things of God. We don't do what God wants in order to be forgiven. We are forgiven and therefore we do what God wants. All of humanity has been forgiven. We are the ones responsible for getting that message out. We are also responsible to say that since we all have been forgiven we must therefore do what this loving God would have us to do something we would not be able to determine or do had not Jesus opened our eyes to understand not only what is written in Scripture but what is written in our hearts by the living presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

We are witnesses. Amen.