



Witnesses of These Things
April 15th, 2018 Annual Parish Meeting
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta
11:15AM Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

Witnesses of These Things



The Collect

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

First Reading Acts 3:12-19

Peter addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his



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name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

“And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

Epistle Reading *1 John 3:1-7*

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

Gospel *Luke 24:36b-48*

Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.



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So, today is our annual parish meeting Sunday, as many of you will have just experienced; a Sunday in the year when we try our best to sum up for one another what it means for us to be Saints on and off this block. It's an almost impossible task, truth be told. In the age of 120 characters or less, what *does* it mean to be people who follow Jesus out onto the sidewalk and into our daily lives? In so many and varied ways, this church community prepares the holy grounds of our lives to be a dwelling place for the living God.

This is an incredibly active church. Sometimes I am astounded by how much happens here just in one day. Yet we know, don't we, that the character of what happens is different to the sum of its parts. Just as the disciples must have struggled to encapsulate all that it meant to experience the risen Jesus, simply by relaying to one another their limited specific encounters with Jesus, one of which we heard this morning, we too can struggle to sum up all that this church community means to us; all that it means to you. For the first followers of Jesus, the experience of the risen Lord was an ongoing, ever-emerging presence. It is



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part of God's holy unfinished business with the world, and we too are part of the succession of saints who have known that risen Lord, filling in our own part a picture that this finite world never gets to fully complete.

So, given these things - that God's revelation in the risen Christ is boundless, and that the life of this parish church is full to the brim - in offering something of a sense of who we are as a church on this annual meeting Sunday, I decided earlier this week to take inspiration from a preacher who answers her homiletical questions by sitting still. Her name is Lauren Winner, Episcopal priest and preaching guru from Duke Divinity, who a few years ago I heard share her practice that every now and then, she likes to go out and about and place herself somewhere in the everyday world to allow that context to speak to her.

For some reason, Lauren has an especial proclivity for Macy's; something about the furniture section of the store seems to draw her in on a regular basis. I decided to go for something closer to our hearts and home here at All Saints', and placed myself on a bench with Mary Magdalene, our



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newest resident in the All Saints' cemetery. The sculpture was dedicated last Sunday, and is a beautiful addition to what is already a beautiful green space in the city. My hope was simple; that I would wait, and watch, to see what of our common life in this church community might come by.

It turns out that sitting there with Mary, placed as she is among the shrubs and flowering plants, it is amazing what you *can* see. At first, it was what you would expect. The children at the Bright Horizons daycare center making merry in their playground; tricycles, wood chips, things to explore and imagine and create. Looking the other way, West Peachtree was sauntering by: people with rolling suitcases, tourists, people heading to do business, and for some inexplicable reason an Emory Police Department SUV parked for the best part of an hour. The birds were chirping, the trees speckled shadows on the path, and for a while at least, I was lost in the beauty of Atlanta in spring.

And then the first living story came by: for this church is home to hope.



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It was inevitable, dressed oddly as I was in clerical collar, that after a while I would begin to attract company. My first visitor was a man who has been with us these past few days. He is also a writer, looking for inspiration out of doors, borrowing paper from the office one day at a time, scribbling thoughts on the bench or on the floor. Yet as he saw me, he had other things on his mind, asking if we had anything to eat and drink. Turned out we did. Actually, we always have something to eat and drink, but this week in particular we had a slightly higher-class of leftovers, from a movie shoot that had happened here earlier in the week. From Tyler Perry, multi-millionaire, to the man on the street who persisted. The Lord does work in mysterious ways.

He and I lingered for a while. He ate. I pondered, yet it was when he left to say 'thank you for saying yes', that I realized that in so many ways that yes is the gift of a community like ours. Jesus' resurrection is God's 'yes' to the whole of humanity, an eternal yes to all of the no's of hurt and failure that we enunciate in our lives to one another. It wasn't about the food, it was about the hope of being seen, of being heard, of being human. This church is home to hope.



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After a while, I went back to the bench, and to Mary, the one who sought out life in a time of death, and before too long another pilgrimage came by, and another lesson: that this church is home to healing.

This time there was a group, led by Louisa, our director of refugee ministries, who was with a family whose child had died just the night before. She was showing them the church in preparation for the funeral. As the translator tried to capture the grief and loss, more than words passed between the six of us gathered there. Death and resurrection, loss and deep comfort; it's the axis upon which we move and have our being; and it is where we look for healing. Theirs is an incredibly heartbreaking story, not the first we have heard because of the ministry of many saints on this block, and I imagine it will not be the last, yet somehow, in being a place of hospitality and deep love, in finding Christ as he walks alongside the brokenhearted we also find ourselves, and we become living homes to healing; balm for the world, casting a gentle light along the dark passageways of grief.



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Returning to the bench a final time, astonished that all of this had happened just by sitting still, a song began to dance its way into my mind. I'm not sure why. Perhaps because singing is not only how we pray in places like this one, it is also how we remember that churches like this one are homes to joy as well as sadness.

I would like to say that at that moment a marching band paraded by playing 'O When the Saints', but in truth it was just me, humming. Yet, had I been sitting on a different bench yesterday, this time outside Ellis Hall, I would have heard a room full of people singing in full voice the most beautiful of harmonies, and I would have heard laughter, and seen movement, and listened to the thoughts of those who attended the music workshop put to words how music makes a joyful home in each of our hearts.

This church is home to joy, and it is home to healing; it is home to sorrow and it is home to hope; just a few gifts of the risen Jesus' life among us. I pray that as we enter deeper into our journeys with one another this coming year, that we will discover the holiness of God that resides in each



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of us. For this is a church where people are loved well, where we listen to one another's soul stories, where we seek to look for another and find one another exactly as we are to be found. This is a space in the city where children play, and where we bid farewell to old friends to dwell with the saints of years now long since passed. This is a church of our Lord Jesus Christ, where resurrections small and large are witnessed week by week.

We are witnesses of these things, witnesses to the foundational living truth of human existence: that God is with us. May God who has given us the will to be all that we are, and do all that we do, grant us the strength and power to accomplish all that lies ahead. Amen.