

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

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Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer

Why witness?

—Acts 1:1-14

My junior year of high school, I came home from school and practice to eat supper one November evening, and on the news was a breaking story. The Berlin wall, which had separated East Berlin from West Berlin for 28 years, was opening up. It seemed unbelievable. Video footage showed people standing with impunity on top of the massive stone wall where they would have been shot by East Berlin guards in times past. East Berliners and West Berliners were making contact with each other, and you could see people with pickaxes and sledge hammers taking full swings at the wall. I witnessed the event. Well, kind of, sort of I witnessed that event. I saw it on the television on the evening news.

Eleven years later I got to know a German man from Berlin. We were talking one day about the fall of the Berlin wall, and that's when he told me he was there that night. He was at the wall. That November day in 1989 he heard the wall might be opening up, so he rushed down there to join the growing West Berlin crowd gathering at the wall. He told me how the crowd was shouting "We want to get in! We want to get in!" up at the East German border guards, 18-, 19-year-olds with automatic weapons, not knowing how those guards would react. The crowd was demanding to get through so the wall could open up. The guards yielded. They did not shoot. After telling me all this, then he takes out a news magazine from that time and shows me a picture of him standing on top of the wall. That was him. He was on the wall! He witnessed it in person. Years later in conversation he was witnessing it to me, and now I am witnessing it to you. Big events get witnessed with the eyes and the ears, and then they get witnessed with the mouth.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead. The same day Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples and told them: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Forty days after rising from the dead, Jesus Christ ascended and returned to heaven. The day he ascended, he told his disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Even big events like the fall of the Berlin wall fade from attention and memory as the generations directly affected pass away. No so with the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Events surrounding Jesus Christ are still being witnessed to by the mouths of people living today. Why? What is so special about Jesus Christ? Why witness?

In my former book, Theophilus—that former book is the Gospel of Luke—I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. Luke did not witness in person the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But he did investigate everything, and he received information handed down from the eyewitnesses and put that information into writing to witness that information to us. Why witness? Well, Luke lays out why. Because of what Jesus did. What Jesus taught. What Jesus suffered. Because of what happened after Jesus died. These things are so significant that they must be witnessed with the mouth in all places and at all times as long as the world lasts.

Jesus did things. He exercised power over the devil and defended people from the devil's control. Jesus scolded the spirits of unclean, evil demons and drove the demons out of people possessed by them. Jesus healed people afflicted by all kinds of diseases and difficulties. Jesus healed fever. He healed skin diseases like leprosy. He healed paralysis. He healed bleeding. He healed blindness. Jesus' deeds even went beyond death itself, as he raised some people back to life from the dead. In quiet and in loud ways, Jesus demonstrated control over nature itself. He quietly took a handful of food and multiplied it to feed thousands of people. He loudly shouted at a raging storm on the lake, and it stopped. Aren't these deeds of Jesus worth witnessing to a world of people just like us, people who are familiar with disease, dread, and death?

Jesus taught things. Primarily he brought good news, proclaiming the time of the Lord's favor. He announced freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed. He taught the forgiveness of sins; he told sinners they were forgiven. A man dealing with paralysis: "You are forgiven." A woman who had disgraced herself with a sinful lifestyle: "You are forgiven." A criminal who was being justly executed for his crime: "You are forgiven. Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus even prayed for his heavenly Father to forgive the men who were unjustly executing him. And forgiveness of sins is what Jesus wants preached in his name to this day and to the end of the world.

In his teaching, Jesus emphasized he came to seek and to save the lost. Like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, like a woman sweeping and searching for a lost coin, like a father waiting for his selfish and prodigal son to come

back, Jesus saved sinners. He brought salvation to their house on earth, and he promised them paradise in heaven. Oh yes, he taught it's a narrow door, that door to salvation. It is only through him, and it is only through faith in him. But whoever enters through that door by faith in him will not go to hell and will not suffer hell fire, but will be taken by the angels at death to be comforted in that place where all believers are graciously received. Aren't these teachings of Jesus worth witnessing to a world of people just like us, people who are familiar with personal evil and the impending end of our earthly lives?

On top of all that, he taught things so contrary to the way our flesh naturally thinks. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who mistreat you." "Deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow me." "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Seek God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." And pray. "When you pray, say, 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.'" "Ask and it will be given to you." All these things Jesus taught and more. Aren't these teachings of Jesus worth witnessing to a world of people just like us, people who naturally trust ourselves and can worry ourselves silly in the highs and lows of earthly life?

Jesus suffered things. Terrible things were done to him. He was fatally betrayed by one friend. Another friend out of fear denied knowing him. People who hated him made fun of him, not behind his back, but to his face, and in plain sight of other people. He was physically beaten. He was rejected, and he was condemned. To death. He was executed. He was crucified. He died. He was buried. Aren't these sufferings of Jesus worth witnessing to a world of people just like us, people who will perish unless a Savior suffers to pay for the wrongs we have done?

Jesus lives. Angels announced it to the women who found an empty tomb: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" He said ahead of time he would rise from the dead, and he did. He proved it, too. He took a Sunday afternoon walk-and-talk with Cleopas and another follower on the road to Emmaus. He appeared to Simon Peter. He visited the eleven apostles and other disciples in person. He showed them his hands and his feet. He invited them to touch his flesh and bones. He ate broiled fish with them to prove he is alive. Aren't these appearances of Jesus worth witnessing to a world of people just like us, people who need victory over death and the hope of everlasting life?

Jesus ascended. Ascension Day was Thursday, 40 days after Easter. Jesus led his followers out east of Jerusalem toward Bethany, onto the Mount of Olives. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. While blessing them, he was taken up into the sky until a cloud hid him from their sight. His followers were still staring in the sky when two angels who looked like men dressed in white clothes suddenly stood next to them. The angels said, "Why are you staring? Jesus went back to heaven. But he will come back in the same way you just saw him leave." Isn't the ascension of Jesus into heaven worth witnessing to a world of people just like us, people who need to know there is a heaven and that Jesus controls everything in heaven and on earth to bring us there?

And yes, Jesus is coming back from heaven. The angels said so. Jesus said so. Before he left, he issued a warning about his return. "Be careful, or that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. That day is coming over everyone who dwells on earth. Be alert all the time. Keep praying for strength to escape and to stand before the Son of Man." At the same time, Jesus offered a wonderful prospect to all who are waiting for him in faith. "When you see the end coming, you know the kingdom of God is near. When the end comes, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is near." Isn't the return of Jesus worth witnessing to a world of people just like us, people spinning ever closer to a last day and a face-to-face meeting with God?

We thank Jesus for every time he has equipped us to witness for him. Every time we responded to a situation, a question, even a challenge with a Christian witness. The success was his. We confess to Jesus every time we got careless and botched a Christian witness. Every time we backed away and kept our mouth closed when we should have given a Christian witness. The sin and failure are ours. We take to heart the message which Jesus liked to speak the most to people like us: "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace."

So he sends us out yet again to be his witnesses in the time and place he has prepared for us. It may not always be the time and place of our choosing, but witnesses don't always choose the time and place. They take the opportunities that come, and they speak.

Great historical events of the past eventually fade from memory into obscurity. Not so with the life, death, rising, and ascending of Jesus Christ. Why witness? The world's Savior went to heaven, and someday he is returning. Until then, he says we will be his witnesses. Amen.