

You Are All Witnesses

By
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Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon

you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Luke 24:44-53

Then Jesus 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. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Starting when I was about 10 or 11 years old, I would take the train by myself up to New York City to visit my Uncle Andy a few times per year. He would prepare special cultural experiences, and part of that was that one night would be spent watching the films Uncle Andy had curated for me for my cultural literacy. There was “Chinatown,” “Three Days of the Condor,” “Marathon Man,” “Pulp Fiction,” “Three Kings,” and on one particularly memorable visit, we went to a small theater downtown to see the newly released film “Memento.”

“Memento” is one of Christopher Nolan’s earliest films, and it’s the story of Leonard Shelby, an insurance claims investigator trying to solve the murder of his wife, which he does while navigating an anterograde amnesia, a particular kind of memory loss that makes it impossible for him to make new memories. In order to help the viewer experience this amnesia, the film alternates between two narrative timelines. There are scenes in black and white that go in chronological order and scenes in color that go in reverse chronological order, such that you do not know what has come before it and you enter the scene cold, just like Leonard with no knowledge of what has come before it. For example, one scene in color opens with Leonard running through a trailer park as he asks, “What’s happening?” He sees a guy running down the next row and he says, “I’m chasing him.” So he runs towards the guy only for the man to pull out a weapon and run towards him, at which point his voiceover is amended to, “Oh, he’s chasing me.”

So in these scenes filmed in color, we piece together, bit by bit, what Leonard is learning as he is learning it, which he does through a complicated system to help himself – polaroids, tattoos, maps with string and thumb tacks, dedicated pockets for various items. At the end of the film, the two narratives, black and white and color, merge, with the last

black and white scene occurring immediately before the last color scene, meaning the first color scene. So the end of the movie is the middle of the narrative that you, the viewer, have been piecing together. Are you confused? That's part of the experience.

The end of the film is shocking and you are left to reflect on the reliability of the narrator or the truth you thought you understood. You're left with questions about memory, grief, revenge. And yet, you are left with the sense that you've encountered something deeply true.

I was amazed by this film. I had never seen anything like it. And so when a special edition DVD came out, I purchased it, in part because I had heard there was a secret feature where you could watch the film in true chronological order, meaning the black and white scenes, followed by the color scenes, from beginning to end.

I thought if I watched the film in the "correct" order, leaving out all the messy bits, it would unlock some gnostic truth for me, that something new would be revealed. But when I did, the film fell flat. Something about constructing the narrative with Leonard – with his polaroids, files, tattoos, mixed up facts, his willfulness – something about even a story that might have been unreliable still got at a much deeper truth.

I think "Memento" has a few things to teach us today, today being Ascension Day, when we remember Christ ascending into heaven following his resurrection and appearances to the disciples, and Confirmation Sunday, when 16 young people join the church after a year of study and discernment.

For starters, our scripture readings today – Acts 1 and Luke 24 – are given to us in reverse chronological order. The consensus among biblical

scholars is that Luke and Acts were written by the same person and that they function as one book in two parts – the book about Jesus and the book about the church. And so you first heard the description of Jesus’ ascension at the very beginning of the sequel. This is the part right after the narrator says, “Previously on...” Then you heard the firsthand account of it. First, you heard the secondary source, which you can see in your bulletin, added some rhetorical flourishes, color commentary, and then you heard the primary source, which is more sparse.

But there’s more to say here. I think there are two approaches to pursuing the truth of the gospel in American Protestantism today. There are those who want a beginning, middle, and end, an easy arc that takes us cleanly back to the beginning, an easy line of succession, and an uncomplicated and pristine provenance. It is as simple as “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Complications like “Why do bad things happen to good people?” or “If the universe is only a few thousand years old, how come we see light from stars that are millions of light-years away?” These questions are to be swept aside. They want a gospel in the right order – no messiness, just old-time religion. And I can see the appeal!

And then there are those – I think you’re here in this room – I know you’re sitting among the confirmands – who are prepared to accept complexity or the possibility that what you thought all along might be wrong. There are those who can handle, who may even love, a complicated or confusing timeline, a map on the wall with strings and pushpins and polaroids, a truth that is hard won, that is wrestled with. Those who aren’t scared of the fact that our Bible isn’t a science textbook, that the church has been wrong, and that we ourselves are on our own journeys of repentance and forgiveness, righting wrongs and mending fences. Those who relish that

wisdom come to us from many voices, from the witness of countless ones who have brought us here, messily, to this time and place.

And I think that is where we have to depart from the movie “Memento” because Leonard Shelby was alone. He was left to fend for himself. In our passage from Luke today, Jesus interprets the scriptures for those gathered there, he opens their minds to understand them, and then he tells them their job is to bear witness to these things to all the world, but to start together in one place. Start together and then go.

Nobody in this room has received the gospel message as cleanly as those disciples did on Ascension Day. Theologian Hanna Reichel, in a book we have been reading in the Wednesday Morning Men’s Discussion group, reminds us that fully half of the New Testament is letters, messages passed on from person to person. Reichel asks us, “What do you have that you did not receive? We all have received grace upon grace from others. Be on the lookout to find more.”

Our being recipients of the witness of those who have come before us could be seen as a dilution of the gospel. That our task is to peel away the layers and get back to just the facts – just what Jesus actually said to them when he was opening their minds to the scriptures – and yet, that is not what has happened. That is not what has led to the profound witness of the church as it waited in Jerusalem to be clothed with power from on high and then went out into the world to bear witness to a resurrected and ascended God for 2,000 years.

Which brings us to confirmation. To these 16 young people who, in a moment, will stand before you and confess their faith. It is tempting to think of their confirmation as them being the last in a long line, simply the most recent ones to join the church, and that they will enliven what we are

already doing by their youthfulness. That for the last year, Andy has been teaching them what they need to know to recite the creeds; that Andy has preserved the line of succession and the untainted provenance; and that they will now continue on just as we have been doing.

Of course, that is not what we have done in confirmation class this year. Yes, they have learned some of the essential confirmation things from me, their mentors, and their teachers, Kathy Fisher, Michael Giampetroni, and Ariel Gonzalez. But far more importantly, they have wrestled with the big questions of the faith, which is exactly how the curriculum, produced by our own Rachel Pedersen and Rebecca Kirkpatrick, is designed. They have spent several weeks on each of the questions found in your bulletin with the goal of being able to say, “yes, Jesus, yes, and yes” in that order, but out of a sense that they can really do so from within their own integrity. Which means that along the way, they have put me through my paces. They have raised the alarm about innumerable theological and pastoral inconsistencies and challenges. They’ve asked fresh questions about what the gospel needs to address if it is to be plausible for them and for their world. They have accepted some of the witnesses they’ve received, but they’ve challenged them too, and then they’ve proposed a witness of their own.

So yeah, this is their induction ritual, but to view it as simply the next step in an incremental march onward into an uncomplicated Christian future is to miss the point. What if instead, we viewed them as witnesses, people adding their own encounter with the living God to the beautiful, chaotic, cacophonous, mosaic hanging on the wall with its polaroids and string. What if this is our induction ritual to them?

Jehu Hanciles is a professor of world Christianity at Emory. He has written extensively about the spread of Christianity around the world from his particular perspective as a Christian from Sierra Leone. His most recent book is called *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*, and he argues that it wasn't a top-down missionary movement that spread the gospel for the first 1500 years of the church. Rather, it was everyday Christians migrating from place to place and living their lives as Christians when they got to their new homes. And he further claims that cross-cultural exchange, what we might call bearing witness, doesn't dilute the Christian faith – it strengthens it. It enriches it. He writes:

“To put it plainly, the mission of God starts on the margins. In sociological terms, margins signify the vulnerability, powerlessness and otherness intrinsic to migration ... down the centuries, the faith birthed in the ministry of Jesus would chiefly spread through migration. Largely due to the role of Christian migrants in the cross-cultural transmission of the Christian message, it recurrently and inescapably penetrates new societies from the margins.”

He goes on:

“Crossing cultural frontiers is not only a prerequisite for the spread of the Christian movement; it is also the means whereby the worldwide community of faith increasingly experiences the fullness of the gospel ... Migration, therefore, does more than facilitate the cross-cultural expansion of the Christian movement; it often provides the impetus for historic transformations of the faith.”

What Jehu Hanciles is saying here is that Christianity doesn't spread by being dropped off in new places. It is spread and enriched by those who come across divides and join new communities. Christianity is spread and enriched when new people join.

When I removed all the complexity and ambiguity from the movie *Memento*, I found something less true. And so it often is with this gospel we've received. This gospel says that before the beginning of time, God decided to be Jesus Christ. And so God created the world and elected a family. And then God became incarnate in Jesus Christ to eat and drink and be friends with those he encountered. And then Jesus was so committed to being with us that he would go all the way to death, where we go, too. And then Jesus, resurrected, would return and appear to those disciples, and after appearing to them, he would ascend and continue to reign in power from on high. And that God is still with us in the gathered community that is animated by that spirit.

It is tempting to beat the ambiguity and complexity out of this story. It is tempting to tame this gospel and to quiet the witnesses who come from faraway places and from the margins and from across divides that want to make it more complex. But to do that is to miss out on the fullness of it. The messy, profound truth of it. And that is where I want to tell you about these confirmands.

One week in class, we printed out the clauses of the Apostles' Creed onto sheets of paper, and students were given green, yellow, and red stickers. We asked them to put green stickers on the clauses they believed wholeheartedly, yellow ones on the ones where they had some questions, and red ones where they just couldn't buy it. There was green, but there were lots of yellow and red. And so we talked it out as a class. And we

were able to correct a few genuine misunderstandings or just not knowing, but for the most part, these doubts remained. And I don't think the doubts ever went away, but neither did these students.

Pastor Rachel has a nickname for each class year – her scholars, her politicians, her mystics, and so on. This class was her skeptics. She tells me they were always wary of a single answer. I love that they are being confirmed on Ascension Day – a strange event that is described in different ways by the same author from book to book, that refuses an easy explanation, that pretty much every Christian who ever lived learned about from somebody else, some unreliable narrator. And yet, for all its “unreliability,” it remains good news for us today. Today, when we celebrate the arrival of 16 new witnesses helping us grow in the fullness of our understanding of the God who is with us here, even while reigning on high. Thanks be to God. Amen.