

Startled, terrified, frightened, doubting, disbelieving, wondering, When Jesus was suddenly among them these were the words that describe the disciples – startled, terrified, frightened, doubting, disbelieving, wondering. On that Easter evening they were gathered talking about the events of that day – how the women had found the tomb empty, that Peter had seen the risen Lord Jesus. Two of the group told how a stranger had joined them on their walk to the village Emmaus, and when he sat at table with them and broke the bread suddenly they knew he was Jesus and then he disappeared. Just as these two were telling the eleven about this Jesus stood among them, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” And they were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.

Often when someone has died one who was close to this person will tell me, “I have trouble believing that he really died. She might say something like, “I kept telling myself he was away on a trip.” Or in the next room, in one case that he was still sitting in his favorite chair. One woman told me – I thought everyone at the funeral was crazy – I knew he had not died. But weeks later she realized that he had.

On the day of our Lord’s resurrection the disciples were having the opposite problem – believing Jesus was alive. He was suddenly among them – they touched him – saw him eat and still the word disbelieving is used of them. But Jesus did not let that stand in his way. 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.

Jesus had taught them these things already – but still they were startled and terrified, frightened and doubting, disbelieving and wondering when he came to them from beyond the grave. So Jesus taught them again. 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.”

You are witnesses of these things.

Sometimes I tell myself that when I get my faith life really together, then I will be ready to go out and speak to strangers about Jesus. When all my doubts are replaced by faith and all my fears erased by trust in my Lord, then I will have something to speak about Jesus outside of this place.

But Jesus said to the startled, terrified, frightened, doubting, disbelieving, wondering disciples, “You are witnesses of these things.”

What had they witnessed? The suffering of Jesus, the Messiah. His death. And now on the third day that he was raised from the dead.

And what were they to proclaim? Repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Jesus name. Our first lesson today ends with Peter proclaiming just that. In his sermon from Acts he tells the people they have killed the Author of Life and that God raised him from the dead. And Peter then tells them – Repent therefore and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.

But now Peter and James and John and all the rest are long gone. O, we have their witness here in the scriptures, but they are not able to go out from this place and continue their witness except through you.

But you say, “I am a startled, terrified, frightened, doubting, disbelieving, wondering follower of Jesus.” And I say, “That sounds like the perfect qualifications along with knowing that Jesus died and was raised and he will forgive those who repent.”

But you ask, “Who would I tell?”

Do you know anyone whose life is in turmoil? Do you know anyone who is concerned about someone they love being sick – or being laid off from a job – or aging? Do you know anyone who could use a fresh start?

But you say, “My life is not all that together for me to be talking to others about Jesus?”

Well, isn't it time to get your life with Jesus put together? Isn't it time for you to confess your sins and to believe and trust in Jesus? God raised Jesus from the dead and made frightened disciples into bold witnesses. God can work in you and through you.

Maybe the big challenge that Easter presents for us today is not believing that Jesus is raised from the dead, but believing that you and I can be raised out of our lifeless Christian faith into a faith that is full of hope. I find myself giving up on people – so many times I believed I could make a difference and gave my all and nothing happened. So I stop trying. Stop hoping for them, stop praying for them. I feel powerless.

Yes, Jesus was raised from the dead. We can all gather here to sing it and pray it and say it.

But can you and I be raised from our deadness? Can we believe once more in the power of God's Holy Spirit working in us, through us? Can we have new hope for the people who have been disappointing us for so long?

To forgive is to treat another as if the harm had not be done. To love when we have every right to hate. To speak when the other has earned only silence.

Shall we proclaim forgiveness of sins only in words? Or shall God grant us new hearts to have new hope and to express that new hope in our dealings with those who have discouraged us?

Jesus is alive. And he can make you and me alive. Now.