

“YOU ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS”

Luke 24:36–53

Key Verse: 24:48

“You are witnesses of these things.”

Do you know who you are? We’re given a name at birth. It may have had some meaning at the time. Or it may’ve been chosen for its lovely sound. But our identity is more than a name. Our identity has many aspects. We may be a student or worker, a daughter or son, a brother or sister, a parent and spouse, all at the same time. We may think of our identity in terms of our ethnicity or nationality, or maybe based on what we’re good at, or not good at. There are other kinds of identity: a major at school, a job title at work, a reputation with friends, responsibilities at church. But what’s at the *core* of our identity? Who *are* we, really? Today Jesus says, “You are witnesses.” Is that *really* our identity? Is it the first way we’d identify ourselves: “I’m a witness of Jesus”? How does this identity become ours? Why do we need it? And what do we do with it?

In Luke’s Gospel this is the last resurrection appearance of Jesus, and it’s the climax. At first his followers are frightened. So Jesus has to prove that it’s really him. Then he explains from the Scriptures, once again, that he had to die and rise again. But this time, he goes on to say what his death and resurrection are for. When we hear the good news of his death and resurrection, we need to repent of our sins and accept the forgiveness of sins in his name. Ready or not, Jesus tells them that they are now his witnesses. He, as the Risen Christ, commissions them to proclaim his gospel “to all nations.” What a vision! He adds how they’ll be able to do it. They’re so weak, but when he sends them the Holy Spirit, they’ll be clothed with power from on high. The ending is glorious. Jesus blesses them and is carried up into heaven. Through all this, his followers are transformed. They find a new purpose to be together: to worship the Risen Lord Jesus, to rejoice and praise God. All believers are called into such fellowship. But in this study we especially want to reflect on his words, “You are witnesses of these things.” May our Lord Jesus speak to us through his word.

I. “It is I myself” (36–43)

As we saw in the previous passage, it's Sunday, the third day after Jesus was crucified. It's late in the evening, and everyone is gathered together with the eleven in Jerusalem. They're marveling at the news that the Risen Jesus appeared to Simon Peter that day. The two on the road to Emmaus just shared their story of how he walked with them on the road, and how he made himself known to them when he broke bread. Look at verse 36 (ESV). Right as they're talking, Jesus himself stands among them and says, "Peace be with you." When we meet the Risen Jesus, he wants us to experience God's peace. But they don't yet have it. Look at verse 37. Even though he says this, they're startled and frightened, thinking they're seeing a spirit. It shows us the condition of our souls without encountering the Risen Jesus. The Bible says we all experience the fear of death like lifelong slavery (Heb.2:14–15). So we easily get spooked.

How does Jesus help them? Read verses 38–40. Though they've just been talking about his resurrection appearances, when he actually appears to them now, in person, they're still troubled and full of doubts. So he shows them his hands and feet, where the wounds from the nails on the cross still are. He lets them touch him to see that he has flesh and bones. His resurrection body is real. Read verses 41–43. This final piece of evidence, his eating a piece of fish in front of them all, is even further proof that he really has risen. Added to the facts of the empty tomb, the linen cloths left by themselves, and the stories of those who met him, they now see his visible wounds from the cross, touch his body, and witness him eating a piece of fish. The truth is undeniable: it really is Jesus, raised from the dead. Resurrection faith is not wishful thinking or delusion; it's based on concrete facts and multiple eyewitnesses encountering him—this time, it's everyone at one time (cf. 1 Cor.15:5–6). But the story doesn't end here.

II. "Witnesses" (44–49)

The resurrection is not just about physical facts and specific encounters. Jesus begins: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you" (44a). Jesus repeatedly told his followers that he would suffer, die and be raised.¹ And here he adds, "...everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (44b). It's not just one or two obscure verses; he's talking about the whole Old Testament. It's all about Jesus, all pointing to him, on so many levels, in so many ways. Through the Old Testament

¹ 9:22,44; 17:25; 18:31–33; 21:37.

prophets, it was actually the Spirit of Christ predicting his sufferings and the glories that would follow (1 Pet.1:11). Countless people in Israel's history read these Scriptures and even memorized them. But now, when the one predicted actually appears, they don't see it. Why? It's because even though we have the Scriptures, there's a veil over our hearts keeping us from understanding (2 Cor.3:14–16). Without the Spirit of God, even with our brilliant minds we cannot understand Scripture (1 Cor.2:12–14). In fact, in our sin we stubbornly refuse to understand. But just as he did for his disciples, the Risen Jesus can open even the most stubborn, doubting mind to understand Scripture (45).

Jesus sums up the message of the whole Bible for them: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (46–47). It's amazing that a book as complex as the Bible, written by so many authors over such a long period of time, has this one major point. Because Jesus suffered and rose from the dead, all people of all nations should hear about it and repent so that they can receive the forgiveness of sins in his name. It's that simple. And all Jesus' servants, including all of us here, should be proclaiming this good news to all the nations. People from all the nations are all around us, right here in Chicago, right here in this neighborhood. And this good news is accessible to all of them, through faith. From the beginning, when he called Abraham, God wanted to bless all the nations through him, to learn his faith (Gen.12:1–3; Gal.3:8–9). So how can all these people from all nations learn this saving faith in the good news of Jesus?

Read verse 48. It all starts with witnesses. These first witnesses of Jesus are known as the apostles.² Without them, we couldn't be sure if any of what Jesus said or did really happened. Their role as his eyewitnesses is so important (1:2). God preserved their eyewitness testimonies about Jesus in the New Testament Scriptures. So we no longer need the Risen Jesus to keep appearing to us and keep proving that he's alive. The apostles' testimony is enough. We have the facts about the Risen Jesus' multiple appearances, the Scriptures that all point to him, and the written testimony of the apostles he had chosen. How much more do we need, in order to know that this gospel message is the truth?

² Eph.2:20; 3:5; 4:11.

And we need to appreciate what great witnesses the original apostles were. As Jesus predicted, people laid their hands on them and persecuted them; they were delivered to synagogues and prisons, and brought before kings and governors; still, they bore witness to our Lord Jesus (21:12–13). Apostle John explains how the witnesses of Jesus in history have conquered: “...for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev.12:11b). They loved Jesus more. The book of Acts shows how the original apostles faithfully bore witness to Jesus (1:8,22; 2:32,40; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39–43; 13:31). God also chose Apostle Stephen and Apostle Paul to be his witnesses (22:15,20; 26:16). The Apostle John describes even Jesus Christ himself as “the faithful witness” (Rev.1:5a). At the cost of his own life, he came to the world to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37). Our Lord Jesus has had countless other faithful witnesses down through history (Rev.2:13; 6:9). The Bible describes them as “so great a cloud of witnesses” that surround us (Heb.12:1). They’re cheering us on, to run the race of faith and be Jesus’ witnesses to the end. Today the Risen Jesus is telling us all: “You are witnesses of these things.” By his grace he includes even us, giving us a new identity.

Let’s think more about what it means to be “witnesses.” **First**, witnesses are those who know the truth. As we know, there are too many false witnesses, people who spread falsehood, or half-baked lies. But the witnesses Jesus mentions here are those who know the truth. How so? They don’t have hazy, superficial knowledge; these witnesses have mastered all the facts. In this case, it’s the facts about Jesus. What’s more, they’ve thoroughly studied all the Scriptures and had their minds opened to understand them. They’ve fully digested the testimony of the original apostles. Most of all, they’ve abided in Jesus’ words until they’ve come to know the truth and been set free from their own sin (John 8:31–32). The more we know the facts, the Scriptures, and the saving power of Jesus in our souls—the most important truth of all—the better witnesses of Jesus we become.

Second, witnesses are those who’ve experienced his grace. Peter, John and Paul were top apostles in the New Testament. But they all experienced the life-changing, forgiving grace of Jesus. They were nothing but sinners saved only by the grace and love of Jesus. Paul especially stands out as a witness, who, even with all his great learning and knowledge, freely testified to what a sinner he was and how great was the grace of Jesus in his life (1 Tim.1:12–17). He writes that he’d been a blasphemer, persecutor and insolent opponent, but the Risen

Jesus chose him to be his servant. This shocking grace in his life actually made it undeniable that he truly was Jesus' witness. Like Paul, we too, despite all our sins, receive grace and apostleship to be Jesus' witnesses (Rom. 1:5).

Third, witnesses have a Christ-like character and lifestyle. As is so well-known, one of the greatest obstacles in being Jesus' witness is ourselves, our sinful nature, our tendency to follow the ways of the world. We can know all the truth and even experience his amazing grace, but still have trouble following his example practically. Instead of making it about our ego, ability or willpower, we need to humbly depend on the Spirit to produce in us the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). Growing in the inner character of Jesus changes our lifestyle and makes us his witness to those around us in so many invisible, unspoken ways.

Fourth, witnesses are unafraid to testify about Jesus. The original apostles spoke the word of God boldly (Acts 4:31). After his conversion, Paul, too, spoke boldly in the name of Jesus (Acts 9:27–28). The Book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness” (Acts 28:31). Witnesses don't say what people want to hear, or talk a lot about themselves or their own ideas. Witnesses stay focused on Jesus. They witness *about Jesus*. *He's* the good news of great joy for all the people (2:10b). We especially need to open our mouths and tell people about his death and resurrection, and how everyone needs to repent and receive the forgiveness of sins in his name. We need to share this good news with all kinds of people, great or small, rich or poor, of any race or religion. To testify about Jesus, we need the courage to come out of our comfort zone.

How can we be such bold and focused witnesses of Jesus? It doesn't mean just to be pushy or obnoxious. Apostle Peter wrote, “...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...” (1 Pet. 3:15). Apostle Paul wrote to his spiritual son Timothy, “Therefore do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God...” (2 Tim. 1:8). We can't be bold witnesses for Jesus if we're afraid of suffering. But by God's power we can be willing to share in suffering for the gospel.

How do we come to have this new identity? Let's read what the Risen Jesus says to them and to us in verse 49. "And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." He is promising the coming of the Holy Spirit. As we'll see in the Book of Acts, it's the coming of the Spirit that helps his followers to internalize their new identity as his witnesses and to live out this calling practically. The Holy Spirit convinces us of the truth, helps us experience his grace, conforms us to the image of God's Son (Rom.8:29), and gives us real boldness.

III. "And they worshiped him" (50–53)

Read verses 50–51. This is known as the ascension of Jesus. Luke will tell us more about it in the opening chapter of Acts. Basically, it shows how Jesus, exalted at the right hand of God, is our Risen Lord. He's exalted above all (Heb.7:26). He's the one who pours out the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33). He's the one who's our real Leader and Savior, the one who truly gives repentance and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31). How do his followers respond to what they see? Read verses 52–53. Experiencing the Risen and Exalted Lord Jesus totally changes them. They're no more startled, frightened, troubled, doubting and disbelieving. They're worshiping, filled with great joy, faithfully praising God in his house, and obeying their Lord's direction to stay. It's a picture of what a church of Jesus should look like. Above all else, it's a place focused on worshiping the Risen Jesus with great joy. It's how we become his witnesses as a community.

Read verse 48 again. May God help us deeply accept our identity as witnesses of our Risen Lord Jesus. May God help us share this good news of repentance and forgiveness with people of all nations.