

When my older sister was fifteen she was working one muggy Florida evening in our neighborhood drugstore when a man came in, approached her counter, pointed a gun at her, and demanded all the money in her register. For Kathy, everything froze: her muscles and her sense of time. But she recalls thinking through the fog of her fear: I need to remember what he looks like. The police will want to know. If I'm going to be a good witness, I need to pay attention; I need to remember this man.

It wasn't enough, though. Nothing in her life had prepared her for that encounter. In spite of her determination, later she could not describe the man's face.

It's a story that makes me wonder: What does it mean to be a good witness? What prepares us for that task? And *what is Jesus thinking* when, just before he ascends into heaven: he announces to his followers: "You will be my witnesses." If a reliable witness is someone who can accurately report what he or she has seen and heard, what qualifications does this fearful and confused bunch bring to the task?

Think about it: Jesus' friends are not very good even at *recognizing* him after he's risen from the dead: there's Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus, Mary Magdalene at the grave, the eleven and their companions in today's story from Luke. They're all blinded by their grief and disappointment—and so they are able to see only what they expect to see: a stranger, a gardener, a ghost.

But Jesus never seems put off by his friends' confusion. He encourages them to come close, to examine the evidence—to see and to touch, to hear and to taste. He knows that's how we make sense of things.

In 2007 the journalist Martha Raddatz published a book about the war in Iraq. In it she tells the story of a young widow finally receiving the body of her husband, after learning that he has been killed in that conflict. -But when the coffin arrives and is opened, she's not quite convinced that this is her beloved—he looks smaller somehow. And so—much to the discomfort of the military escorts, she begins to unbutton the uniform that covers his body. She cannot be convinced of her husband's identity until she finds her own name tattooed on his skin—until she touches that mark. Only then can she say as she fingers the inscription: "That's me, Leslie—and this is my Dusty."

It's a bit like that for the disciples here—what finally allows them to recognize their beloved Rabbi in the flesh, is not his distinctive pattern of speech or the familiar constellation of his facial features—it's his wounds. For them, the unspoken condition hanging in the air seems to be that if this really is the man they knew, then he will bear the marks of his crucifixion. And so two times in this short

passage Jesus points to his hands and his feet, allowing his friends to see and to touch his mutilated flesh. The disciples are finally assured of Jesus' identity by the brokenness of his body.

And then comes one of my favorite lines in all of scripture: "*While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"*" For me, this is the Eucharist, the incarnation, this is God coming to dwell with us exactly where we live. In the confusion of this moment—Jesus asks to eat with his friends—as though their common hunger is all the bond they need. And then, when his friends have caught their breath—when they have begun to taste this new reality—he begins to teach them what all of this means.

He reminds them of God's ancient promises: in the law, in the prophets, in the psalms. Like a patient teacher going over the material one more time, he takes them step-by-step through the scriptures until the light dawns in each of their faces, and they begin to glimpse how those familiar promises have been fulfilled through his suffering—or better yet: *through God's refusal to let that suffering be the end of the story*. In effect, Jesus says to them, understand everything you've ever been told in light of my story, see everything through the light of a love that is stronger than death.

And so they begin to see.

They are almost ready to be witnesses now. But not quite.

They must wait for one more promise to find fulfillment.

He takes them out to Bethany, and raises those wounded hands again. The same hands that touched lepers and held children, that steadied Peter on the waves, and broke bread to feed the hungry—those same hands are raised one more time in blessing.

This is where *I* would like to pause. I want to freeze this moment, but as much as I want Luke to linger here, he will not do it. Without missing a beat, he tells us that *while Jesus is in the act of blessing his followers*, he departs—I think that Luke wants us to understand by that particular formulation that Jesus' departure itself is part of the blessing.

But how can that be? How can it be a blessing for them, for us, to lose the touch of his hand, the sound of his voice, his peculiar way of drawing in the dust?

I don't think it's an idle question. I think that Luke places the story of the Ascension at the end of his gospel--and then again at the beginning of Acts--not

because it is a convenient literary device, but because it is a key to his witness. In Luke's hands, Jesus' withdrawal into heaven is the beginning of a deep Trinitarian breath.

As those still wounded, but now living hands go to clasp the right hand of the one who created us in love, somehow the son's breath will mingle with the father's and then be released with a power charged by the fulfillment of an eternity of promises. It is for this holy tempest that the disciples must wait. It is the storm that will bring Jesus' spirit as close as their own breath—it is what we will ponder next week as we gather to welcome the miracle of Pentecost. *(Pause)*

--Ah, but what does this strange story have to do with us? We did not walk the Roads of Palestine with Jesus—we have not put our hands in his wounds. If good witnesses attest to what they have seen and touched, heard and tasted—what is it that we can say? Maybe that first band of followers could be his witnesses, but isn't it all just hearsay now?

Perhaps the writer of Ephesians can be helpful to us here. He writes to people more like us, who never touched the warmth of Jesus' flesh—but this author seems to think that even those of us who did not walk with Jesus are capable of witnessing to the reality of his presence among us. How can that be?

The author of Ephesians acknowledges the faith and love that are building inside the community to which he writes. But he knows that their character as witnesses is not yet fully formed. So he prays that this group of believers will breathe in the same Spirit that was unleashed on Jesus' first followers on the day of Pentecost—and here's the interesting move: he seems to think that breathing in that Spirit will affect the way they see.

His wonderful phrase for this indwelling of the Spirit is having the “eyes of your heart enlightened.” They will witness not only to what they see with their eyes, but to what they see with their hearts.

Here's what was helpful to me in understanding this image: in the early centuries of the church the long period of preparation that believers underwent before they were baptized—that period of preparation was sometimes known as the period of *enlightenment*. So when Paul prays that they will see with the eyes of their enlightened hearts, he's praying that they will see learn to see all of life through the water of baptism.

Let me make it more concrete: I have a pastor-friend who tells this story about her first pastorate. She was frustrated by entrenched patterns in the church, patterns she saw as destructive, and she shared some of her annoyance with a wise elder, an elder who knew something about seeing with the eyes of his baptized heart. He

said to her, “But Kathryn, the Holy Spirit is always dancing somewhere. You have to watch for where the Holy Spirit is dancing.”

Friends, if we want to be Jesus’ witnesses we have to learn to see with our baptized hearts—for it’s true that we can only witness with authenticity to what we have seen and heard, touched and tasted. So we have to watch for him vigilantly, expectantly, as he moves in and out among us. We have to gather together and eat at his table every chance we get. We have to remember his words and the ancient promises in which his words are rooted—and then we have to pray that he will breathe inside us when we don’t sense any air in the room. That he will fill us with such fullness that we will be emboldened to love the world the way that he does—no matter what the cost.

In the end, witnessing doesn’t depend on our health or strength, on our mental acuity or physical prowess—it depends most of all on the way we breathe; it depends on whether we are willing to see with our watery hearts.

And so I want to tell you a heart story:

In 1987 my dad was hospitalized with severe blockages in his coronary arteries. His unusual heart required six bypasses, but in time he recovered fully, as many of you can attest. *Nineteen years* after that surgery, he received a letter from a nurse who had worked in his cardiac intensive care unit. She had tracked down his address by calling the church he once served in Virginia, the church that is right across the street from the hospital in which they met.

My dad has no recollection of their meeting; in fact, he has no memories at all of this nurse, but this is the encounter she described in her letter: She had not been assigned to care for my father, but for a man whose CCU bed was near my dad’s. Her patient was unconscious, and very, very ill; he would die just a few days later. Apparently, my father watched her care with great tenderness for this terminally ill man. She spoke gently to him, even in his unconscious state. My father sensed *the love of God* at work in her, and later, when the nurse came by my father’s bed, he described to her what he had perceived.

What my father did *not* know was that this nurse also had been sensing the presence and grace of God as she cared for her patient. Nor did he know that she was beginning to discern the first promptings of a call to a new kind of ministry. My father simply shared what he had observed.

And so, 19 years later, this former nurse wrote to my father that she was just finishing seminary and about to accept her first call, and she wanted him to know what their long-ago conversation had meant to her. She wrote, “I remember thinking, as you spoke, that I had felt particularly tuned in to the Spirit” [as I cared

for] “my patient...[but] I was amazed that it could be seen, by a person watching, by you....”

Further on she wrote, “It was a little thing, but you were an affirming witness to a minister in formation, and I have not forgotten. I hope I get the opportunity to pay it forward, to be an inspiration and a teacher to a young person growing into his or her calling.”

“In the meantime, thank you very much for *seeing me that night, for telling me what you saw*, and for having a heart strong enough to keep you here so I could thank you.”

Her letter ends in gratitude, and that is where we, too, will end. I think gratitude is the surest sign that someone is being equipped as a witness. I told you that I wanted Luke to stop and linger in his account before Jesus ascends—*even knowing what I know, I resist moving on from that moment*. But it comforts me that the disciples didn’t resist. Listen again to the end of Luke’s account: “*While Jesus 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.*”

Several years ago I led a brief Easter service at Highland Farms. The congregation included residents whose bodies and minds were strong and clear and worshipers whose health was more compromised. There were a few visiting relatives, even a visiting dog. And when the service was over, there was time for us to greet each other. One woman’s face was already beaming when I approached her wheel chair. She looked in my eyes and simply said “Thank you.” And then she perseverated on those words, like a stylus caught in a well-worn groove on an old 33, she said over and over: Thank you, thank you, thank you—thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. And with each utterance the joy in her face deepened, until there seemed to be nothing left unsaid. What truer, more faithful witness to the reality of Easter, the power and joy of the Ascension, the promise of Pentecost—than such an irrepressible spring of gratitude.

With the eyes of our watery hearts, we recognize that God’s faithful witnesses are everywhere, lifting their wounded hands in the act of blessing us, and inviting us to join in the Spirit’s peculiar choreography.

Thanks be to God.