

Can I Get a Witness?

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Luke 24:36b-48

Easter is a day. Easter is a season. Easter is a commitment. Easter is a calling. Two weeks ago, on Easter morning, I made reference to Easter 50 years ago, April 14, 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated 10 days earlier.

We included a quotation from King in our church newsletter then, which I shared on Easter: “There was a time when...the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion: it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”

I have been thinking of that quotation a great deal, as a steady stream of articles and editorials have come to my inbox reflecting on King’s death and his life and legacy and the ministry of the church. I want us to think about that this morning, but I want us to do that through the lens of the gospel story we just heard, and the notion of “witness.”

Witness is a troublesome word to us. In the secular sense it typically means someone who has observed something, a crime, perhaps, and then has the opportunity or obligation to recount what happened. Recounting what happens matters here as well, though from a faith perspective it carries different freight.

A witness is something many of us feel we are not, one who shares faith with others, often in ways that could be off-putting, or certainly, at least, beyond the comfort level of the giver or receiver. “It’s what other people, other churches, do.”

Recounting what happens, though, matters. In Luke, Jesus appears among the disciples after his resurrection. He shows them his hands and feet to reassure them, but they are still terrified. Who wouldn’t be? He asks for food, resetting the conversation. He then launches into a massive teaching session, recounting through scripture all that had happened. The focus of his ministry has been repentance and forgiveness, he reminds them. He concludes: “You are witnesses of these things.”

You are witnesses. The Greek word is our word for “martyr.” Remember that. You are witnesses. You are martyrs, which takes us quickly to ultimate sacrifice, but that at least

connects us with the risk it takes to live as followers of Jesus, the risen one, and to share his gospel. You are my witnesses.

We are all called to be witnesses. None of us are saints. But I have been thinking a great deal about Martin Luther King in this context. King as witness. Easter witness. Two themes emerge from much of the King reading I have been doing, one positive and one not so much.

One theme reminds us that King was, first and foremost, a Baptist preacher, and that his message, his work, all of it, was generated from that place of faith. We forget that, scholars and commentators say. Andra Gillespie writes: "Many people still identify King primarily as a 'civil rights leader' and fail to understand his Christian Social Gospel. As a follower of Jesus, he adhered to nonviolence and a vision of 'the beloved community. Beyond civil and voting rights, he pursued a nonviolent, moral revolution and a vision of a world without violence, hatred, war, poverty and oppression. Many still do not understand the fullness of King's dream and our society has failed to live up to it." (*Time*, "10 Historians on What People Still Don't Know About Martin Luther King, Jr." April 4, 2018)

Scholar Michael Eric Dyson writes that "Faith summoned Dr. King, an ordained Baptist preacher, to the ministry. It made him a troublemaker for Jesus and it led him to criticize the church, criticize the world around him and, in turn, be criticized for those things. King passionately believed that a commitment to God is a commitment to bettering humanity, that the spiritual practices of prayer and worship must be translated into concern for the poor and vulnerable. Dr. King would want us to live his specific faith: work to defeat racism, speak out in principled opposition to war and combat poverty with enlightened and compassionate public policy. ("We Forgot What Dr. King Believed In," Michael Eric Dyson , March 31, 2018)

That's the first theme, King's faith. We lose that, its impact, the farther we get from his actual witness.

Which pivots to the second point. What that faith compels us to do. For not only have we blurred those faith commitments of his, we have sanitized them and sterilized them in such a way as to lose their impact. Theologian Gary Dorrien writes: "After he was gone the memory of King taking the struggle to Chicago, railing against the Vietnam War and economic injustice, emphasizing what was true in the Black Power movement, and organizing a Poor People's Campaign faded into an unthreatening idealism. King became safe and ethereal, registering as a noble moralist. It became hard to remember why, or even that, King was the most hated person in America during his lifetime. But the King that we need to remember is the one who keenly understood what he was up against." (*Time*, "10 Historians on What People Still Don't Know About Martin Luther King Jr." April 4, 2018)

What he was up against was not only resistance politically and culturally, but from the faith communities as well. Dyson writes: “In his lifetime, he was disappointed in the complacency of both black and white churches.” King was rejected by white Christians who supported segregation and racial bigotry. But he was also rejected by “white moderates who claimed to support civil rights but who urged caution in the pursuit of justice...” These were the Christians to whom King wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

We have sanitized King’s vision, perhaps, and sterilized it. We have taken the sting out of his critique of church and culture. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. writes: “In so many ways, King’s life has been reduced to the lead character in a fable the nation tells itself... (the fable) enlists King in fortifying the illusion of this nation’s inherent goodness. It coddles the country from a damning reality.” “Fifty years after King’s assassination,” Gaude writes, “...so much (is) unchanged.” Racism prevails. Poverty persists. Gaude concludes: “We have a chance, once again, to make real the promises of our democracy. It will require us to honestly confront who we are. No myths. No fables. Evil sent King to his bed, but he got up and kept fighting. We must do the same.”

Raphael Warnock, who now serves as the Pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta where King served, writes: “That Martin Luther King Jr. does not fit neatly into the official, public narrative we Americans like to tell ourselves about our nation or the movement. Accordingly, the dangerous man who died in Memphis has become a victim of identity theft. Following his death, we replaced him and the more radical aspects of his message with selected sound bites that will not make us too uneasy.”

Warnock concludes: “Fifty years after Martin Luther King died, America needs to hold a national funeral for King — the *faux* King we have created — so that we might hear anew the real King calling us to what he called ‘a revolution of values.’ Such a revolution would lead us to dismantle systemic racism and to invest in a high-quality public education for every child, early childhood development, universal health care, a living wage and clean energy jobs for a sustainable future on the planet. We should hold another funeral and bury the simple story so that we can actually build what King called ‘the beloved community.’” (“Another Funeral for King,” Raphael Warnock, April 6, 2018)

“You are to be my witnesses.” That is our Easter commandment and invitation. No saint, Martin Luther King, Jr. sought to do just that. We are not him, so our calling will play out differently, but it is no different. It is no different for Kate, who we have baptized. It is no different for Caroline, Harrison, Zach, Tim, Alexa, Dan and Hannah, who we welcome into membership this morning. It is no different for any of us. Easter witnesses.

Michael Eric Dyson writes that “Martin Luther King Jr. was a man of faith who didn’t mind making trouble for God. He believed his purpose in life was to bring justice to as many of God’s children as possible while proclaiming the revolutionary power of belief...He saw faith as a tool for change, a constant source of inspiration to remake the world in the just and redemptive image of God.”

Our gifts will be different, but our calling is no more or less than that – to make trouble for God, to bring justice, to remake the world not in spite of our faith but because of it. With those earliest disciples, we will be terrified, yes. But with them, we will also be empowered.

On Easter, we say with great gusto that “Christ is risen.” Then we tuck that affirmation away for another year. We must not. “Christ STILL is risen,” and because of that we have work to do, important, urgent, hopeful work. To be witnesses. Amen.