

WITNESS

SHERARD EDINGTON

Luke 24:44-53

My wife Courtney is a native of Maury County, Tennessee, which lies about an hour south of Nashville down I-65. Despite mis-pronouncing the name of their county, the people down there affectionately refer to Maury County as “the dimple of the universe.” That designation was conceived by a local poet around 1900. And it stuck. So, if you want to visit the dimple of the universe then head for Maury County. If, however, you are not into dimples and would prefer to spend your time elsewhere, say, for example, the center of your country, then you must go travel to Lebanon. Unfortunately, it is not Lebanon, Tennessee, that holds that particular claim to fame. The geographic center of the lower 48 states is found just outside of Lebanon, Kansas. From downtown Lebanon, Kansas (population 202), you take US Highway 281 north for one mile. At state road 191 you turn west and go another mile. At the end of the paved road you will find a stone monument. It is a flat-topped pyramid with a flagpole set in the middle. There is a plaque on the side of the monument explaining that you are standing at the geographic center of the United States. How did they determine this? Well, if you were to take, say, a large piece of cardboard or plywood and carefully cut it into a map of the US and then balance that map on a pin, the point of balance would be there just outside Lebanon, Kansas.

If you now feel inspired by my words to trek to this landmark in Kansas, I need to warn you that you may be disappointed. The monument you seek is not at the nation’s geographic middle. The correct location is situated half mile away. It’s on a hog farm that is private property and apparently the tourists were upsetting the hogs. But if you do find yourself at the monument and desire to ponder life at the center of the country, there is a bench next to the monument where you can sit and meditate. There is also a picnic shelter so if you packed a lunch you can eat it there. Just do me a favor and don’t take ham sandwiches out of respect for the hogs. And if you seek a more spiritual dimension to your visit then you can walk a few steps from the monument over to the church. They even have a chapel there. This is the US Geographic Center Chapel. This chapel is a small, one-room, white, clapboard building. It is about 8 feet by 12 feet. It has a short steeple on the roof with a cross. The chapel you will find there now is not the original chapel. It is the second one to grace that site. The first chapel was destroyed in 2008 when a speeding vehicle missed the turn at the T-intersection. But that is life at the center of the country.

This location outside Lebanon was first recognized by the U.S. National Geodetic Survey in 1918. They were able to do this after New Mexico and Arizona acquired statehood in 1912, thus completing the 48-piece map puzzle.

If, however, you are the sort of wild-eyed idealist that feels compelled to recognize the admission of Alaska and Hawaii to the US in 1959, then *your* geographic center will be found in South Dakota in the town of Belle Fourche. I am a purist so I will always be drawn to Lebanon.

And that brings us to the Gospel of Luke. Just as the United States has a geographic center—a point on which the nation balances—our reading from the Gospel of Luke has a center-point as well. Our reading for today consists of 10 verses and I have identified the fifth verse as being the focal point of this passage. Did Luke intend it this way? Of course not. Chapter and verse numbers are a modern addition to scripture. But in this passage, verse 48 is clearly the balancing point. It is here that Jesus says to his disciples, *You are witnesses of these things*. This idea that the disciples are witnesses is the Lebanon, Kansas, of our reading.

What is a witness? A witness is someone who has personal knowledge of an event. We usually think of witnesses as having seen a crime or an accident. The requisite qualification of being a witness is personal knowledge. You can't be a witness with secondhand information. "Did you see that hog truck crash into that church?" "No, but I know a guy who did and he told me about it." That is not enough. A witness has to see it themselves.

A witness doesn't just see, they also tell. They tell what they know. A witness who keeps silent is not a witness; they are just an observer. A witness sees and a witness testifies.

This seeing and testifying places the witness at the geographic center of the event. Let's say that you are hungry and you stop at a convenience store for a snack. You are in the store microwaving a frozen burrito (your guilty pleasure) when a man bursts through the door waving a gun. He takes money from the cashier and leaves. The police quickly capture and arrest the robber. There is a trial and you are called in as a witness. There was a cashier, but she died. She was in church one day praying when a truck transporting hogs crashed into the building. You are the only one left and if you don't testify this man will go free and the robbery would essentially never have happened. If you do testify—if you do tell what happened—then the world will know and the criminal will face the consequences. Being a witness puts you at the center of the story. What happened before and what happens after depends on you.

Our reading for today falls at the very end of Luke's gospel. On Easter morning, the women go to the tomb and discover that it is empty. They go to the disciples and tell what they have witnessed, that Jesus is gone. Later that day, two of Jesus' followers depart Jerusalem and head home. They are near the village of Emmaus when Jesus joins them on the road. They don't recognize him until they share a meal with him. They return to Jerusalem to report to the disciples what they had witnessed. Finally, that evening, Jesus appears to the gathered disciples in

Jerusalem. He shows them his wounds. He invites them to touch him to know that he is real.

Then, Jesus retells the story about himself, how the words of the scripture—the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled—how the Messiah would suffer and rise from death on the third day, how *repentance and forgiveness of sins* must be proclaimed in his name to all the world. And then he reminds the disciples of their responsibility: *You are witnesses of these things*. All that they have seen, all they know, all that Jesus has taught them, they are now to be witnesses of it all to the world. They have seen and now they must testify.

Jesus commands the disciples to remain together in Jerusalem because God is about to send the Holy Spirit to strengthen them in their testimony. Jesus leads the disciples out of the city, he blesses them, and then he is carried away up into heaven. They will not see him again.

Although this passage comes at the end of Luke's gospel, it is the center of a much larger story. Luke offers us the story of Jesus and his disciples. Luke also gives us the book of Acts which tells of the disciples and others going out into the world and testifying. Aided by the power of the Holy Spirit, those who witnessed Jesus go out into the world sharing the good news of Jesus the Messiah telling of the *repentance and forgiveness of sins* that comes in his name.

As followers of Jesus ourselves, we are also called to be witnesses of Christ. Have we seen Jesus personally in the flesh like the disciples did? No. But from the testimony of the witnesses who have gone before we know his words and what he did. We also know the moments in our lives when we have experienced Christ's presence—a moment of compassion or forgiveness or healing. When we witness these things, it becomes our calling to testify to the world. If we don't, we are just observers.

Here in the church we are all witnesses. We have all seen something, we have seen Christ present in our world in some way, Christ has touched our lives. Even if you wondered into a church for the first time you did so because you had seen something that changed you even if you could not explain it. The church is a community that witnesses to one another. We share our stories and our experiences to help each other understand the *repentance and forgiveness of sins* offered through Christ. We are Christians because we make Christ the center of our lives. When we witness, we swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

One last thing about being a witness. The Greek word that is translated witness is *martus* (μάρτυς). The word *martus* is the same word from which we get our word martyr. A martyr is someone who gives their life for a cause they believe in. By giving their life they testify to what they know. The first Christian martyr was Stephen, one of the apostles, who was stoned to death on the charge of blasphemy

against the Jewish faith. By giving his life, he testified what he held to be true. To be a Christian witness means that we must also be a martyr. Some, such as Stephen, do so with their lives. All of us, however, who truly witness to Christ become martyrs in that by testifying to Christ we are changed. We die to our old selves and become something new.

When we recognize the presence of Christ in our world, when we testify to others what we know to be true, when we give of ourselves, when we make Christ the center of our lives, we are witnesses.