

## *You Are Witnesses*

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON LUKE 24:44-53

16 MAY 2010, SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, ASCENSION SUNDAY

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*You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:48)*

SOME PEOPLE PRACTICE THEIR FAITH LIKE THEY WATCH A PLAY. They sit in their seats, show their appreciation for the preacher, choir, and others actors, then rise at the end of the performance and head for the exits to go on with their ordinary lives. Attending church takes the place of leading a spiritually mature life.

But once in a while things get out of hand, and the audience is no mere audience any longer. It happened for me during the play *Nonsense*. At one point some of the actors came down off the stage and involved members of the audience in conversation. It was almost as if the play had stopped and another kind of drama had begun. Until then I had enjoyed *watching* the play, but at that point I became *involved* in the play, and it changed my experience.

Maybe you've had that experience. It's called "breaking the fourth wall." Actors normally play their parts as if they are surrounded by four walls on stage and no one is watching. Occasionally the actors will break the fourth wall, the one between them and the audience, and involve the audience in the action. On the day when, according to Luke's gospel, Jesus ascended into heaven, he broke the fourth wall of faith, and the true Church has never again been able to be a mere audience. We are part of the action; we are witnesses, and the world needs witnesses.

Robert Pinsky, former poet laureate of the United States, was a beginning teacher at Wellesley College when he saw an amazingly poised senior class president at that school deliver some off-the-cuff remarks to Senator Edward Brooke. Brooke had just delivered the 1970 commencement address at Wellesley, an address that is remembered mainly because it was dull as ditch water. The class president, twenty-one-year-old Hillary Rodham, responded extemporaneously: We need you to speak to us about the crisis in our cities, Senator, and we need you to speak to us about the war in Southeast Asia. Or words to that effect.

There stood the senator, whom Pinsky described as "the handsome man of power wearing the robes of study and contemplation," spouting commencement platitudes,

and there stood this thin, bespectacled young woman, who seemed almost out of place in the robes she was wearing, demanding relevance and insight and truth.<sup>1</sup>

The world today demands relevance and insight and truth, and it demands them especially of us, who profess to be the body of Christ. We are here to testify, to be witnesses of these things, witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

According to *The Book of Discipline*, the document that shapes our life together as a church, "The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced. There can be no evasion or delegation of this responsibility; the church is either faithful as a witnessing and serving community, or it loses its vitality and its impact on an unbelieving world."<sup>2</sup>

Those who profess or confirm their faith here today, and those other young people who will confirm their faith next Sunday, risk standing before us and making a public statement and commitment. They are in the spotlight for a moment. But the real risk, for them and for any of us, is to live the life of resurrection. The real risk is for us to stand before the world and live, with relevance and insight, the truth we profess. Whether we are new in the faith or an "ancient of days" with a lifetime of church involvement behind us, when we claim the name of Christ, we step into the spotlight and invite the world to see what God is doing, and to see it in us.

NOTES: ▪ 1. Robert Pinsky, "A musing on the costumes of commencement," *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 June 2001. ▪ 2. *The Book of Discipline 2008*, ¶ 129.