



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Be My Witness Ascension Day 5/16/2021

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

My grandfather was a larger-than-life kind of figure for me growing up. He was a tall man, a big man with an even bigger heart. He was a public school teacher and later became a district superintendent. He was a person with authority who used it to stick up for the little guy. And he was a great storyteller. He loved to spin tall tales for his grandsons, stories that the older we got, we realized weren't always about the exact facts, but they always managed to contain a deep truth.

But perhaps most of all, he was a fisherman. And if you've ever had a true fisherman in your life, you know what I'm talking about, right? It's not just a pastime for them. It is not just even a serious hobby. It is a spiritual vocation of sorts. It was such a passion that he really, really wanted to pass it on to my little brother and I, and so we were just little kids when he started taking us out.

We were so small, he had to carry the gear. He had to get our rods all organized. He helped us bait the hook and our little arms were too small to be able to really pick up and cast those big rods that he bought for us. So he would cast for us, even when we got bigger, he'd still cast for us to make sure we got our hooks and our lines right in the right place so we'd catch a fish.

But as the years went by, he got older and his body began to fail him. He began with a cane and later traded that for a walker. One summer. When I was in college, we flew up to visit them. It had been years since we saw them. I could tell that my grandfather's diabetes was really getting the best of him, so I offered to take him fishing, wondering to myself, if this might be our last chance. His eyes lit up and we dusted off the tackle box and I drove us out to a nearby lake.

As my brother and I unloaded the car, I looked back at the water and I could see my grandfather slowly making his way to the shore. He was so unsteady on his feet, even with the walker, and it really hit me. Here was this larger than life figure in my life somehow seeming a bit smaller, a bit frailer. I could see his hands shake as he tried to bait the hook. And when he went to pick up his fishing rod to cast it, he didn't have the strength to do it himself. So he looked up at me and he said, "Well, Christopher, it looks like it's your turn now. It's your turn to cast for me."

If you've ever had the experience to care for someone who once cared for you, and as I know, many of you are actually doing right now, you've seen this cycle of life play out.

There comes a point for some of us when the person who once fed us, who once helped us get dressed, once bathed us as a child will look up at us one day and say, it's your turn now. It can be one of life's most sacred moments when it happens. It's kind of a mix of sadness and vulnerability, but also deep, deep connection. And a kind of joy for me, kind of a spiritual joy of having the chance to care for them in the way they once cared for you, to love them in the special ways they once loved you.

I wonder if that had crossed the minds of the disciples when they looked up to heaven. After all, they clearly were not expecting Jesus to go anywhere that day. As we read in the account and Acts just before Jesus ascends, they were asking Him, would this be the day? Would this be the day that You will restore the Kingdom? Is this the day that God's reign will finally arrive? And why not have their hopes up considering what they had seen over those last several weeks? They had seen the most powerful empire, most powerful military mind the world had ever seen, throw everything they had at Jesus. And He got up.

They had seen firsthand that when it comes to God, the powers and the principalities of this world, even death itself, powerless before Him. So I can't blame them for asking, surely Jesus, this must be the day. This must be the day that suffering and poverty will end. Surely this must be the day the naked will be clothed and the hungry fed. Surely, this must be the day fear would be forgotten and love would finally triumph.

By the way, do we still ask those questions today? Do we ever ask, when will this suffering end? When will injustice stop? Is this the day that a good God will finally remove evil from this world? It's really one of the great questions of faith, if not the great question of faith, isn't it? It's a very human question. It speaks to the longing in our hearts and our vision for a world that we can only dream of. It's a good question. It's a holy question.

But as Jesus is about to ascend to heaven, He seems to be telling us that it's the wrong question. He says, "It is not for you to know the time or periods that the Father has set by His own authority." It is not for you to know. All you need to know is that you will receive power from the Holy Spirit. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth. It's not for you to know the time. That's God's business. All you need to know is that you will be my witnesses. It's your turn now.

And I know some of us will hear that word, "witnesses," our alarms, go off a little bit. I'm supposed to be out witnessing? What? That doesn't sound terribly Episcopalian to me. It reminds me of a couple of guys who came to my door, knocking. This was before the pandemic, two clean cut men, wearing white shirts, black ties, a bag of pamphlets and magazines under their arm, big smile on their face. And I stand there beginning to kick myself for why didn't I look out the window before opening the door? And they say something like, well, hello. We're from the church of such and such. Do you know where you're going when you die?

You know, I'm just trying to enjoy my day off here. Do I really want to get into this with these guys? And then of course, I remember, wait a minute, wait a minute, Chris. You're ordained now. You've got an out. So I said, "Actually guys, I'm an Episcopal priest, so thanks. But I'm good. I'm good." Well, whatever it was, however, they understood that it

did not register at all because they said something like, “Oh, well, in that case, maybe you won't mind if we tell you a little bit about Jesus?”

So yeah. That kind of witnessing, not terribly Episcopalian. But I don't really hear Jesus telling us to go door to door with pamphlets and trick questions. Do you? I don't hear Jesus telling us to threaten people with hell or to try to make people afraid of a God. They haven't even yet met. I hear him telling us to be His witnesses, to be His love, to embody His love, not just with words, with our lives, show the world my compassion with yours. Show the world my mercy with yours. Show the world my forgiveness with yours. Show the world my love with yours. It's your turn now.

And what's more, I hear Him saying, be my witnesses in the places where it's probably least expected. In first century, Palestine, that was Samaria and Judea, but in 21st century, Metro Detroit in our secular world, I don't think we have to go that far. How about that lonely widow down the street in Bloomfield Hills? How about that young clerk at the corner market in Royal Oak? How about that exhausted nurse at Beaumont? How about that stressed out teacher who looks after your kids in Birmingham? How about that workout partner at the gym worried about his job? How about that fellow student down the hall in your dorm, homesick? How about that anxious employee sitting across your desk? That scared little girl about to get her first vaccine shot? Or that newcomer to church, standing alone?

Be my witness. Love like I loved. Don't be tepid. Don't be safe. Don't hold back. Surprise them with your love, catch them off guard with your compassion, go the extra mile, reach out to the one most left out. Turn heads with the length you'll go to be there for someone. Witness in this way and I'm telling you, they will ask you about Jesus. They will ask you, what is going on here? This is wonderful, but who are you? Why are you so generous? Who taught you to be this way? Then you can use all the words you want.

And by the way, this very thing happened to me last Friday, when I got another knock on my door on my day off. But this time it was one of my neighbors. He had seen my post on Nextdoor and he had come to the vaccination clinic here at the church. He had been blown away by the compassion and the care that you all gave him and his daughter that day. He wanted to ask me, tell me more about this Episcopal church. Tell me more about how you came to a life of faith. What does it mean to be a Christian? He was a self-professed agnostic, but something, something you did, something you said touched him that day, awoke something inside him and he wanted to know more.

That's, friends, how it works. That's how the gospel is spread. That's how a small group of former fishermen started a church, began a movement and toppled an empire. And if that sounds like a tall order, if that sounds like, whoa, Chris, that is way more than I can do on my own. Thank you very much, then hear this. Hear this: you are not alone. You are never going to be alone. Jesus ascended so that He will be with you always.

No longer limited by the distance His voice could travel, no longer bound by the two leg He once traveled by, Jesus, the Christ, is with you always, and you will meet Him again, and again, and again, in the faces of the people to whom you are sent.

So let us rejoice, just like the Disciples do as they return home, let us rejoice because power is coming our way, power to love as we were loved. Power to care as we were cared for. We are the hands and the feet of Jesus now, by the way, just as you are right where you are. You don't need to look to the heavens for signs, instead, abide – abide, where you have already been sent. Love whomever God puts in front of you and the kingdom will come. So rejoice, pick up that fishing rod. It's your turn now.

Amen.