

Easter 5
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

May 2, 2021
Rev. Paul Moore

Bearing Witness

Laurie Houghton loves to climb mountains. Growing up in Ecuador with him, he was part of the mountaineering club in High School. Living here as he does, he has climbed a bunch of the mountains in the Cascades. His favorite is White Horse, near Darington. I have been part way up, to where I can see the summit. It looks like I've gone at least half way there, but Laurie assures me that I've only gone maybe a third of the distance, and only the easy part! I've seen the views from on top—not with my own eyes, of course, but through his, through photos he's taken from on top. It's absolutely spectacular. Maybe one day...

Mountains have always been a metaphor for the spiritual journey. The experience of being on the top is amazing, giving perspective on everything below, rewarding the hard work of the climb, and filling one's spirit with exultation and joy. But the process is rather ironclad. Unless you're going to cheat with a helicopter, you can only get there by following the path, and in the spiritual life, there are no helicopters. Today's readings lay out a path.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus gives us the wonderful image of abiding in the vine. He is the vine, we are the branches. God is the keeper of the vineyard who prunes the branches so that we produce fruit. Separated from the vine, we are only firewood. There is no fruit, no lifegiving sap, no nothing. The first step on the journey is to abide in the Vine.

How do you do that? How do you abide in anything? You commit yourself to it. You delve deeply in it. Karisse would tell you that when I first learned falconry I abode in falconry. Falconers will tell prospective apprentices that falconry is a way of life, and I took that statement to heart. I studied the books, I watched my hawk, I tried this and I tried that. Every moment I could get away I was in the field with that silly bird and my dog. I preached about it so often Karisse told me to stop telling bird stories! If we do that with our hobbies, how much more with the living, resurrected Son of God? Abiding in Jesus is to study what he said, to learn to tell the stories about him, to find in his manner of life the inspiration for your own, to see in him the model of full humanity, to know him to be a living reality in the world today through the community of the Church, and to worship him as the Son of God.

This first step places us at the trailhead up the mountain, hiking shoes on, trekking poles in hand, and maps, food, water and extra clothing in our backpacks. This is the first stage of the journey.

What happens next is reflected in the lesson from the Apostolic Instruction. The author of the Epistle of John makes some rather startling statements. God is love. Whoever loves knows God, and whoever does not love does not know God. How can you say you love God and hate your sibling? The two are irreconcilable. Loving one another IS

loving God, because—God is love. What does that mean? I saw a headline a while back about Prince Harry's trip to his grandfather's funeral. Meghan, pregnant with their second child, (and target of some rather racist abuse by the royal family,) did not accompany him. He was to be in England a week, and at day two he was sorely missing her! He abides in her love.

When we abide in Jesus as the Vine, we discover that the very sap that gives us life is the Spirit of self-giving love. As our Presiding Bishop will tell you, that's no easy task. Love like what Jesus shows us on the cross has nothing to do with sentimentality. It has everything to do with what we do for others. It has everything to do with the respect we hold for others, the honor we grant others, the way we honor the sacred core of the Image of God in others. It is hardest to do for those in whom we find it hard to find the image of God. Frankly, I find it hard to love Derek Chauvin right now, or Officer Gutierrez who told Lt. Nazario he would "ride the lightning," a possible reference to the electric chair. Bishop Curry encourages us to keep saying what we believe and keep loving those who believe otherwise. I believe that the investigations and trials and rethinking of what policing is all about are all an expression of love. Some do not agree with me, and I get that, but we move forward on faith, not sight, doing what we know is compassionate, even when it is costly to us. If we are to abide in Jesus' love, then we must act in love toward one another. Loving God IS loving neighbor.

There is nothing more profoundly healing than treating people out of a place of self-giving love. Not only are we set in resonance with the very fabric of existence, we encourage that same kind of resonance in others. If we believe that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration, then this stage is the work of the participant. This second stage is the hike up the mountain, with its slippery spots, its steep slopes, its creek crossings, and its breathtaking glimpses of where we are going.

In the passage from the Sacred History we get to the top. Philip goes south toward Gaza. He is sent by the Spirit, so this is more than a physical journey. It is a journey into that place where grace happens. There he encounters one who is Other. He is an Ethiopian, presumably a Gentile convert, not native born. He is a eunuch who, incapable of reproduction, cannot leave the legacy of a name. Philip is instructed to approach, to join in a circle of friendship and fellowship around the Hebrew Scriptures. There, in the liminality of the unknown, truth is uncovered, wisdom practiced, and love shared. The incomplete foreigner continues home a whole member of the Family of the Followers of Jesus.

Tradition tells us that this man's witness founded the Coptic Church. If so, what a legacy of a name! What a place to hold in the Church! The otherness of the man is healed in the community of Christ. In the 2004 film, *Shall We Dance*, with Richard Gere and Jennifer Lopez, Gere's character, John Clark, a bored high-powered executive, decides to take dance lessons from Jennifer Lopez's character, Paulina. He keeps all this almost secret from his wife, who begins to think he's having an affair. She hires a private investigator who discovers the truth. In a conversation about it, the PI tells the wife that there is no

greater honor than to bear witness to the life of another. That statement leads to a dramatic and satisfying ending to the story!

Bearing witness means truly seeing the other for who they are. To be seen is to know oneself to be in community. Bearing witness in word and deed to the truth of another is the highest expression of love. At the top of the mountain, do we love enough to bear witness? The One Parish, One Prisoner team is busy building a relationship with Paul Fuentes, our releasing friend. When he comes to share life with us late next year, we will walk through the formidable hurdles ex-cons face in achieving true freedom. We will bear witness.

Our journey to the top of the mountain begins in love and ends in love. It starts with abiding in Jesus and ends in abiding in and with people. At this stage we look out over the vast vistas of the human family in community with the rest of creation and are struck by awe. They say the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, and the second-best time is right now. Every journey begins with a single step. So, who is up for the climb? I invite you to abide in Jesus.