

Rise and Shine!
Luke 24:36-49
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I'm not a morning person. I'm a tried-and-true night owl. In fact, when I was younger, I didn't realize the sun came up before 9 a.m. I figured it got up when I did. I swore coming out of seminary that I would not go to a church that had an early morning service. My first church had an 8 a.m. service. God was amused, I was not.

I've always struggled with getting going in the morning. In my freshman year of college I actually failed a geography course because it met at 8 a.m. and I simply stopped going because that was too early to try and remember the capital of Zimbabwe. I deliberately chose my first job at a newspaper because my hours started at 4 p.m., which gave me just enough time to get up, shower, and eat breakfast before I had to be at work.

I'm convinced the Bible is biased against night owls, because it constantly talks about the benefits afforded to early risers. For example, Psalm 30 says, "Sing to the LORD, you saints of his; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." I know some people who rejoice quite heavily in the night and then weep in the morning, but I don't think that's what the psalmist was talking about here.

As I've aged I've been forced to reckon with the fact that the day does start before 9 a.m. and that there may actually be some benefit to being awake for it. Among the decorations in our house, we have two signs, one at the bottom of the stairs and one at the top. The sign at the top, which we see on our way to bed each night, says, "Good night, sleep tight, sweet dreams." And the sign at the bottom of the stairs, which we see on our way down each morning, says, "Rise and shine and be happy." Sometimes, I'm lucky to accomplish one of those three. While I may rise, I may not shine, and I definitely am not happy about it. But both of our scripture passages today remind us that we were made for something more than just getting up in the morning and going to bed in the evening. We were made to change the world in the time in between.

We are in the middle of our Time and Talents Stewardship Campaign. Each year around this time, we take a few weeks to remember that God has given us all gifts and we are called to be stewards of those gifts. In the fall, we focus on our financial gifts, and in the spring, we look at the gifts we have of time and talent. To steward something means to manage or look after something that belongs to someone else. So if we are stewards, which the Bible calls us, we have the responsibility of managing the gifts God has given us, using them in a way that gets the best ROI.

Do you know that acronym? I didn't until a few years ago. I thought it was the French spelling of the name "Roy." ROI is a financial term and means "return on investment." For example, when you're putting money in stocks or bonds or other stuff you put money in, your choice is determined by which one will give you the maximum results. What will give you the best return on your investment? God's promise to us in scripture is true: each of us has been given a gift to use. As Paul says in I Corinthians, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." In other words, you've been given a gift to use for the good of others, and God is expecting a good return on God's investment.

That's what the risen Jesus is reminding the disciples in our reading from Luke today. It takes place on Easter evening, as the disciples are still trying to make sense of what has just

happened to Jesus. When they went to bed last night, he was dead. This morning, there are rumors he's alive. Rise and shine, indeed! Just a minute ago they had been wrestling with the fact that Jesus' body was missing, and suddenly the missing body is standing among them, breathing and talking and offering peace and ordering a fish fillet.

But before the crumbs can even fall from his beard, he has a few after-dinner remarks to make. He expounds upon the scriptures and says, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Jesus is saying, "God has invested in you by sending me. Now, it's time for you to provide a return on that investment." In other words, God has done what Jesus said God was going to do: God has raised Jesus from the dead. Now it's our turn to do what we said we were going to do when we made our confession of faith or were raised from the baptismal waters. It's time to rise and shine.

We do this by following Jesus' command to be witnesses to what we've seen and heard. That might seem strange, since we haven't really witnessed anything. Any of you there when the stone was rolled away? Did anyone grab a selfie with Jesus as he walked out of the tomb? All we know is what we've been told by a 2000-year-old book. How can we testify to something we didn't personally witness?

Because someone did witness it. Once there existed a real, flesh-and-blood group of people who said, "We saw him. We saw his hands and feet. We saw him eat. We heard his offer of peace." And those people told others, who told others, who wrote it down, who passed it on, who lived it out, and now we hold it in our hands and our hearts. We stand on the shoulders of the disciples, who saw with their own eyes what we know in our hearts to be true, and then lived it out in ways that changed the world.

But it's not completely accurate for us to say we haven't witnessed the presence of the living Christ, because we have. We haven't heard him say, "Peace be with you," but we've seen the power of his reconciling love and his ability to help heal divisions. Although he may not appear in bodily form and share a meal, his presence is tangible in soup kitchens, and around our kitchen tables, and around this communion table.

We have witnessed Christ in our midst and must continue to do so by how we use our gifts. Father Hugh Burns says, "The place to look for Jesus is in our need. Look for him in our pain. Look for him in the boredom. We will find him right in the middle of our sickness, nestled in the darkness of our depression, in the loneliness and anger of a divorce or a child gone astray. It is only in our weakness that we will ever know the power of Jesus' resurrection. It is only in the ordinary moments of life that we can experience an extraordinary gift that his risen life can give us." And when we do, we are witnesses, call to share the good news of repentance and forgiveness with all the nations.

In other words, we are called to rise and shine. We are called to rise to the good news that nothing can separate us from God's love, and then to shine our lights into this dark world. By doing so, we are following the example of Jesus Christ, who was called to rise from the darkness of violence and death, and to shine the light of resurrection and hope out from the tomb and into this dark world. Every time we use our gift to serve someone else, we are being a witness to the presence of the risen Christ among us.

But we miss those opportunities, don't we? We don't always provide God a good return on God's investment in us, mainly because we're not paying attention. I was at an amusement park once, and to get to the top of one of the rides, you had to climb a winding wooden staircase

that was at least 150 stories high. I'm a scared of heights, so that may be a slight exaggeration. I finally made it, and do you know how? One step at a time. I kept my head down and my eyes focused on the next step. I never looked up, I never looked around me. I stayed focused on the next step. Sure, I missed a gorgeous view of the park, but I also made it to the top safely with my lunch still on the inside.

I'm glad Isaiah wasn't behind me on these steps, because listen to what he tells the Israelites when they are facing their steepest challenge of returning to their homeland after being in exile: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Lift up your eyes and look around."

No way! Are you kidding? Then I might realize how high up I am, I might see the dangers all around me – the rickety staircase swaying in the wind, the hard concrete sidewalk 150 stories below me. I'm keeping my head down. That's a tempting approach to surviving life. Keep your head down. Stay focused on the next step ahead of you, the next task ahead of you, the next day ahead of you. Don't look up, because what you might see may be too scary – children growing up, your body getting older, relationships changing. Keep your head down. Focus on getting through today. Don't look up. But what opportunity might we miss if we do that? There is tremendous need all around us, tremendous opportunities to serve others, if we would only look around.

I'm a part of a movement here in Lexington called LexGiveBack. This week, we're encouraging everyone in our city to do an act of compassion for someone else for the purpose of raising the level of kindness in Lexington. I was at Chocolate Holler a few weeks ago, and had just set some LexGiveBack cards on the counter. A minute later I saw a little girl, probably five or six, go up to the counter and take one of the cards. She brought it back to her mom, and they read over it. "What does it say, Mommy?" "It says we should do something nice for someone else." "Oh, I want to do that!" I eavesdropped as they started brainstorming together ideas of what they can do during that week. The little girl got excited and suggested picking up trash around their neighborhood and making "No Littering" signs. This little girl looked around, saw a need, and is doing to meet it. To quote Shakespeare, by Willy Wonka, "How far that little candle throws its beams! So shines a good deed in a weary world."

God created us, God granted us gifts of generosity and teaching and leading and service, and then God invested in us, going all in by sending Jesus to us. And now, we are the witnesses to these things, the good news that Christ is alive and has something to offer through us if we are willing to rise and shine. Rise and shine to the joy of teaching our children. Rise and shine to the blessing of visiting someone who is lonely. Rise and shine to extending God's grace to local and world outreach ministries. Rise and shine to offering a hand of greeting or a communion tray on Sunday morning. Rise and shine to helping us care for our facilities, to helping us offer opportunities for fellowship and learning, to lifting up songs of praise and thanksgiving. You have a gift. God has invested in you. God has put everything God has into you, trusting that you will provide a good return on that investment. Join us in the joy of serving God! Rise and shine!