My mom has known her good friends Pete and Betty Joe for more than 40 years. They all went to the same church in Virginia and used to travel together to the Outer Banks of North Carolina before Pete and Betty Joe moved there and, several years later, my mom moved across the street from them. One evening last week, I sat with my mom and her two friends in their living room. Betty Joe had her leg elevated; she had had skin cancer surgery the day before, the fourth attempt to remove the cancer from her leg. The doctor said it would be painful, for there wasn't much skin left to pull together over the wound. Pete has been fighting cancer for many years and now it has moved into his bones. He is undergoing chemotherapy and the drugs are taking a toll on his body, leaving him very weak. My mom was struggling with the side effects of the chemo she had five days earlier and this was her first trip out of the house since her chemo appointment. I sat and listened as the three talked about their illnesses, doctor appointments and medications. I listened as they spoke about common friends and acquaintances, about driving six hours to a service to inter Betty Joe's sister's ashes, about attending a memorial service for an old friend. This living room converation was not idle chatter, but sharing of real life and death matters among three people for whom the future is more uncertain than it ever has been. As I drove back to Floyd the next day, I wondered what Easter means to my mom and her friends this year, what resurrection means in lives that are so consumed with illness and pain.

On the church calendar, we're still in the season of Easter but in many ways resurrection now seems more a claim about a past event or a future assurance than a present reality. After we took off our Easter church clothes and ate our Easter dinners, our minds and hearts moved to issues of suffering and death. We remembered the doctors' appointments coming up. We turned on the news and saw reports of death around the globe. We thought about friends and family who are going through tough times – relationships splitting apart, illnesses taking their toll, financial struggles consuming waking hours and even some that should be given over to sleep. It's hard to see resurrection life when death is all around us.

It's also hard to see resurrection life when we don't know what to do with it or fear truly believing in it. Remember how in Mark's gospel, the women who went to the tomb and found it empty ran away and told no one because they were afraid. In Luke, the women told the disciples what they had seen and the disciples did not believe them. When Jesus appeared to the two men on the road to Emmaus, they didn't know who he was at first. Even his disciples didn't recognize him when Jesus showed and it took him eating a piece of fish for his friends to realize Jesus wasn't a ghost. It would have been far easier for the disciples to keep on with what they were doing, talking about Jesus, about what they had learned from him, mourning his death, putting the pieces of their lives back together again. But then Jesus came along, as unexpectedly as he had the first time. He upset the rhythm of their lives once again, just as they were getting on with life as best they could. Before he left again, he gave them a new identity, one they never asked for. Jesus proclaimed them witnesses to what they had seen and heard. The disciples were startled and terrified, joyful and disbelieving at the same time and Jesus was making them witnesses? A person wouldn't have to be that much of a cynic to wonder how that was going to work out.

“You are witnesses of these things.” It's a statement, a command, even something of a challenge when it comes from the mouth of Jesus. “You are witnesses of these things.” The words are now spoken to us, just as clearly and urgently as they were to the first disciples. We, who spend much of our days mired in matters of death, are witnesses to the resurrection. We, who aren't always sure what resurrection even means or whether we really believe in it, are witnesses to it. How's that for irony? When you think about it, it's not that crazy an idea. You and I witness all the time. We bear witness to what is important to us, from the books we read to the television shows we watch to the sports teams we cheer on. We witness to our political beliefs in the candidates we back. We bear witness to important events that happen in our families and in our work lives. We witness through the volunteer work we do and the causes we support.

It's not all that different when it comes to witnessing to our faith. Witnessing doesn't have to mean forcing someone else to believe what we believe. We don't have to wield our faith like a club or use words that we could never imagine coming out of our own mouths. The kind of witnessing Jesus is talking about is simply telling others when we sense God's presence in our lives. A good witness is someone who speaks simply, honestly, conversationally, about something good that has happened. A good witness is someone who puts his or her faith into action in a way with integrity and humility. And, when we look at the example of the disciples and the witnesses to the resurrection, a good witness is someone who speaks of God even when he or she is confused, joyful, disbelieving – often all at the same time!

If Jesus were looking for perfect, untouched people to bear witness to him, he would be out of luck. As I think back to that living room last week, I remember glimmers of witness in the talk of illness and death. I think of the courage it must take these people just to get out of bed in the morning and face a new day. I remember Pete saying, more than once, “We don't have it so bad. There are a lot of people worse off than we are.” I remember the excitement of my mother, planning a cruise and scheduling her chemo around the trip, trying to anticipate how she'll manage the side effects when she's away. I remember that all three are active members of their churches and attend whenever they can. I remember my mom trying to figure out if she can put in some volunteer hours at the thrift store she's worked at for years. As I remember, my faith is strengthened by these witnesses who show me how resurrection life can bloom in the darkest, most unexpected places.

You and I, Pete and Betty Joe and Mom – we are all Jesus has and we are who Jesus has chosen to be witnesses to the truth of the resurrection. It's a lot to ask but Jesus doesn't expect us to go it alone. He gives us the power of the Holy Spirit, moving us to do and say what we could not on our own. Jesus gives us one another to live and grow together in faith.

[*You each have a blank index card. I'd like you to take a moment to think of something good that has happened in your life this past week, something you're used to talking about – family or work or sports or whatever. Write that on one side of your card... now, turn to someone near you and share what you've written.*

*Now, think about a time recently when you have sensed God at work in the world. It can be in your personal life, through the work of the government or church or someone else's life...turn again and share what you wrote*.]

Guess what? You've done it. You've witnessed about God to someone else. It may seem awkward now. It may get easier with practice; then again, it may not. But you can do it. It's what you're made and meant to do. “You are witnesses to these things.” Think of just one way you can do what you just did here out there this week and you'll be well on your way to becoming a witness to the resurrection!

Amen.

*Easter 3B*

*April 19, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 24:36b-48*