

I had imagined that this would be another of those odd, 'Ascension Sunday' sermons – you know, lots of references to Jesus in glory (such were the hymns I chose) and an obscure conclusion that suggests we must do our best and rely on the Holy Spirit in Jesus 'absence'...Tuesday's news out of Texas – so soon after a shooting in Buffalo – changed that.

It's difficult to focus on glory after these events.

Yes, the world is in a shambles. Yes, it is hard to watch our American friends fumble and fight about something that seems to have such a simple solution. Yes, from a position of faith we are urged to pray, and live in hope of something better...but praying and hoping and hanging those hopes on some mystical theological abstraction is not going to cut it – it's not enough, and it is not what Scripture suggests as a tonic for times like these.

The road to Emmaus was paved with regret and tension. Two disciples flee the city, hoping to find a place to come to terms with their grief, and they are met by a stranger, who turns out to be the Risen Christ. The encounter continues beyond Emmaus, for a little while, as Jesus tries to get his friends up to speed: Remember what we've done together – remember the Scripture – remember what I've told you – and be assured that you will receive power from on high. This power, mentioned in Luke and Acts, is to enable action from the disciples. This is not about waiting for God to intervene.

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’

Don't sit idly by, says Jesus. God is with you, and I am returning to God, and this is your work to do. Have the hard conversations. Live as though your faith matters. Yearning for the kingdom is all well and good; but you are witnesses to the kingdom. You've got to go and live into it.

Thoughts and prayers – hope and faith; these are only some of the ingredients. Action; indignation; grief and outrage; fear and folly. These things demand action – demand change.

Claiming, as some will, that these horrors such as we are living through are necessary steps in our long and miserable road to redemption is misguided and dangerous.

Imagining that because Jesus is risen and ascended, and will one day come again then all we must do is believe and endure...transforms the life-giving message of the gospel into uselessly exclusive nonsense.

Jesus calls us to action. Jesus calls us to rage against the kind of behavior that we take for granted these days: 'Oh, the world is a dangerous place – people are afraid – safety and security are complicated issues – (and my favourite) you can't legislate morality or common sense.'

The world is a dangerous place because we make it so. We humans are greedy, selfish, and horribly narrow minded when it comes to matters of the collective good. We qualify our desire for good and our definition of success according to very local definitions. We divide the world and its problems into manageable pieces according to our own biases – dividing by language, skin colour, nationality and religion – and even when that religion requires us to 'love one another' we find ways to qualify that

love. The world is a dangerous place, and Jesus has 'gone to God' and left us, his witnesses, to make it less dangerous. And thoughts and prayers aren't cutting it.

Words can help. Words aimed at politicians – letters to law-makers – words that express anguish and outrage. Words that demand action of those who would lead us. To replace rhetoric with respect and reason. To ensure that the gun-madness is nipped in the bud here in Canada. (Let's not pretend that we don't have a problem – we do.) And we must be prepared to accompany our words with action.

Angry protests have lately been the realm of the disaffected. The flag-waving hoard who imagines that their 'god-given rights' are being trampled. Perhaps it's time to hear from those to whom God gave responsibilities to stand and be noticed. 'You are witnesses,' Jesus said – we are called to represent the best of human impulses and the highest human desires in a world driven by the lowest common denominator.

To do that seems dangerous right now. To speak and act out against the chronic inhumanity in the world seems pointless – the problems are so large and we are overwhelmed. But witnesses are essential. A witness can turn the tide of a criminal trial – a witness brings fresh perspective and some small sliver of hope to a hopeless situation. A witness suggests that there is another way.

So Jesus is risen – and the witnesses turned that news into a global expression of hope. And Jesus ascended, and the witnesses "worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

We stand in a long line of witnesses – all of whom found themselves caught between two truths; that the world was a dangerous place, and that God so loves the world. What makes a difference in this dangerous place is how you express and embody the love of God.

We remind ourselves in the communion liturgy that 'Christ has died; Christ is Risen; Christ will come again.' We accept these as articles of faith, but our waiting ought not to be passive. Witnesses must be present. Witnesses have been 'at the scene.' This dangerous world needs us to be present and persistent and faithful truth-tellers. And there's no time like the present for that.