

**EASTER 3B – April 15, 2018**  
***You ARE Witnesses***  
**(Acts 3:12-19; Luke 24: 36b-48)**

I was at work minding my own business when Paul Olivieri, my supervisor at Yellow Freight, who was the Shift Operations Manager (or SOM for short), tapped me on the shoulder and said, “The boss wants to see you.” I had no idea what that meant, but it didn’t sound good. When I hesitated, Paul gave me one of ‘these’ (*motion with head*), indicating that I should follow him and he proceeded to lead me down the hall to the executive offices and into a swanky-looking conference room. Seated around the mahogany table were the terminal manager (the “boss” Paul was referring to), the assistant terminal manager, and a third, well-dressed gentleman who was introduced to me as a company lawyer.

The boss invited me to sit down and Paul took a seat beside me as the others continued the conversation they had been having when we entered the room. They were discussing an upcoming arbitration hearing involving a dozen or so workers who had recently been fired. And, at that moment, I quickly realized what this meeting and the need for *my* presence were all about.

You see, several months earlier, just after I had come to work for the Yellow Freight Company as a dock operations clerk (or DOC for short) at their Maybrook, NY terminal, there had been a rash of “book-offs,” the term they used when employees signed out and went home sick. There was a whole procedure to be followed; the *last* step being that they were required to come into the office and, in the presence of the dock operations clerk, sign the book-off sheet before punching out their time cards. In other words, it was *my* responsibility to see that they followed proper procedure.

Again, I was fairly new on the job so I didn't think anything of it when the first two or three guys went home sick that day. But even *I* became a little suspicious when, in the course of less than an hour, a *dozen or so* dock workers from the day shift all signed out sick.

Well, before long, word drifted up to the operations office from the loading dock that all of these guys had simply signed out sick in order to go drinking at a bar that catered to truck drivers, just down the road next to the interstate. It was actually their coworkers who had "turned them in," so to speak, because *they* were angry over all the extra work the foremen had given them when their buddies booked off!

To make a long story short, Paul, the shift operations manager, and Joe, the assistant terminal manager, followed up on this tip and proceeded to go *down* to the bar to check things out for themselves. There they found these "supposedly" sick dock workers enjoying a few beers and shots together along with some of the drivers and other guys who had just come off the third shift. And instead of being the least bit worried or concerned over being found-out, these "sick" dock workers just smiled and waved at them, and hoisted their beer mugs and shot glasses in mock salute.

Paul and Joe, I was told, simply made a mental note of who these guys were, returned to the terminal to verify these names with the book-off sheet records, and then took this information to the terminal manager who made the decision to fire the offenders on the spot. In fact, as I later learned, the company immediately sent notice of the firings by telegram so that when these guys returned home from drinking later that afternoon, some very *unhappy* wives and girlfriends were waiting for them at the door. But these guys *still* weren't worried, however. After all, they belonged to the famed Teamsters Union...

It was now several months since these firings; the union was, in fact, fighting to get them their jobs back; and the case was about to go to arbitration. The word on the dock was that these guys had every confidence they would be reinstated. I had even overheard one of them say, at the convenience store I often frequented, that he fully expected, not only to get his old job back, but also all the back pay for the time he had been out of work as well. “When all’s said and done,” he gloated, “I’m just gonna end up with a three month vacation at the company’s expense!” They were *that* arrogant, and truly believed that their union was *that* powerful.

Which brings me back to that meeting in the conference room... I sat there as the lawyer outlined the company’s rather “cut and dried” case against the fired dock workers, and then reviewed the list of witnesses they were planning to have testify. And, as I soon discovered, right at the top of the company’s list was the *one, single* individual who personally witnessed each and every one of these fraudulent book-offs; namely, the dock operations clerk on duty that morning. In other words, you got it – *yours truly!* The lawyer looked over at me, smiled, and said, “Son, you’re going to be our *star* witness.”

But, again, remember... this was the Teamsters Union we’re talking about here. And you don’t necessarily mess around with the Teamsters. Just ask Jimmy Hoffa. Oh... that’s right... you can’t, because they’ve never found his body, did they? When I was growing up, rumor had it that Hoffa, the former Teamster president, ended up in one of the end zones when they were building the old Giants Stadium back in the seventies.

Needless to say, therefore, I was feeling a *little bit* nervous and uneasy as I left the conference room that day and walked back to the operations area. And it didn’t help matters any that, as I walked alone down that long corridor, someone inside one of the

adjoining offices, who I couldn't *see* – only *hear*, was quietly whistling “taps.”

Of course, bad news travels fast. So when I got back to the operations office, I immediately sensed that all the foremen, who had come inside off the dock to eat their lunches, already knew what had just taken place... No one said a word... They wouldn't even *look* at me. That is, until the newest foreman, the *former* dock operations clerk who I had replaced, finally asked, “What's your shoe size?” I didn't get it at first, so I said, “What?”

“Your shoe size,” he repeated, as the other foremen coughed and snickered... “for the concrete boots they're gonna fit you with before they dump your body in the Hudson River.” I guess you could say that it was precisely at *that* point I realized that being a quote unquote, “witness” was probably the *last* thing in the world I wanted to be!

...And isn't it funny how many Christians feel *exactly* the same way... Me a witness? *No way!*

Today's gospel, of course, recounts for us yet another post-resurrection appearance by Jesus. Once again, the disciples are startled and terrified. For one thing, they thought they were seeing a ghost. So Jesus invited them, just as he did in last week's reading from the Gospel of John, to check out his hands and his feet; to touch him and see that ghosts don't have flesh and bones. But they were still disbelieving and wondering, so finally Jesus said, “Have you anything here to eat?” and proceeded to chow down on a piece of broiled fish in their presence.

Then he immediately went on to open their minds to what Moses, the prophets, and the psalms had said concerning the Messiah; namely, that he was to suffer and die and rise again on the third day... and that repentance and forgiveness were to be proclaimed

in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Then he added, “You are witnesses of these things.” As I imagine it, he looked at them, smiled, and said, just like that company lawyer said to me, “Ladies and gentlemen, you’re gonna be my *star* witnesses!”

Now, in the final few verses in Luke, that follow this morning’s passage, we are told that they accompanied him out to Bethany and worshiped Jesus as he ascended into heaven, and then they “returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” But part of me wonders if there were still... a few doubts.

After all, they had seen with their own eyes what the Romans had *done* to Jesus; how the imperial power, with encouragement from the Jewish leaders who were so jealous of Jesus’ popularity and saw him as a threat, quickly moved to arrest, convict, torture, and execute their beloved friend and rabbi. And now he was *back*? What did that mean for *them*? In other words, being a friend and disciple of Jesus wasn’t necessarily a safe thing to *be* in Jerusalem in those days. And being a star witness to his resurrection, after the political and religious authorities had so effectively conspired to put him to death, was sort of like... well, sort of like testifying against the Teamsters, I guess!

In an old episode of *All In The Family*, Archie Bunker was witness to a mugging. His son-in-law, Mike, of course urged Archie to testify when the case went to court. But not Archie!

“Do you know what you gotta go through if you’re a witness?” he complained. “I’m a working man. I don’t get paid if I show up absent... To go to court, you gotta put on a shirt and tie, drag yourself downtown, and hang around till the case comes up, which you never know when. And by the time it does, you forget what you was gonna say, and the other lawyer makes a monkey outta ya!”

No, being a witness – of *anything* – is often probably the last thing we want to be. But as Christians... it's not only what we're *called* to be – it's who we *already are*.

John Hamby writes, “Our English word ‘witness’ come from an Old English word we do not use very much anymore, but (it was used) in Elizabethan times and afterwards. It is the word ‘wit.’ ‘To wit’ means ‘to know.’ A ‘wit’ is (therefore) ‘a knowledgeable person.’ So a ‘witness’ (is someone) who knows something and (then) testifies to it.”

Now, today, we typically think of a “wit” merely as someone who has a talent for making clever remarks. But as we just heard, *originally* the word referred to “knowledge” and the “power of reasoning.” Thus, even today, when we reach the absolute limit of our knowledge and reasoning, we still say that we are at our what? “Wit’s end,” right?

So a “witness” of Jesus Christ is someone who has come to *know* Jesus and then simply testifies to what he or she knows. And, in light of today’s gospel, it’s critical to remember here that simply *seeing* Jesus was not enough to make witnesses of those disciples. They certainly *saw* him when he came and stood among them. But they were afraid and disbelieving at the same time. What *made* them witnesses, therefore, what transformed them from “wondering” to “faith” was the *understanding*, the knowledge, that Jesus gave them when he opened their minds to the scriptures.

And so what that means for us, of course, is that we can be witnesses too, even though we were not physically present for one of Jesus’ resurrection appearances. In fact, the whole point of our text this morning is to remind us that we are *already* witnesses simply by virtue of what we have come to know and to believe about Jesus Christ. You and I are witnesses of these things, reminds Jesus.

As one commentator has written, “This is not a command telling us what to do... so much as a statement about *who we are*. We are witnesses of these things. We may be good witnesses or bad witnesses, but we *are* witnesses.”

“...that is the role that Jesus gives to the disciples and to us in this story – we are to be witnesses,” says Kristen Barger Grant, pastor of Cedar United Methodist Church in Ham Lake, MN. “Not *expert* witnesses,” she writes, “just witnesses – people who tell the truth about what they have experienced...”

In other words, two thousand years after the fact, we can still give evidence of how the risen Jesus has come into *our* lives and retold the *story* of our lives in a way that opened our minds to the truth... We are witnesses” she adds, “when we can invite someone to look into our homes, our families, our friendships, our work, our checkbook, our day (planner) – and find Jesus there. We are witnesses,” she says, “when we allow ourselves to be touched by folks who are lost and afraid. We are witnesses when we live in a way that defies any explanation *other than* the presence of the risen Christ within us.”

A little boy once returned home after his first day of Sunday school. His mother asked him, “Who was your teacher?” And the little boy answered, “I don’t remember her name, but you know how grandma can’t stop talking about me when she’s around other people?” The mother smiled and said, “Yes, I know.” And the little boy added, “Well my Sunday school teacher must be *Jesus*’ grandma because she didn’t talk about *anybody else!*”

That’s precisely what happened to those first followers of Jesus who came to be known as “apostles.” They couldn’t talk about anyone else. Their disbelief turned into faith and their fear into courage...

Jump ahead in time with me now to our *first* reading, from the book of Acts. The Day of Pentecost has come and gone, many signs and wonders were being done by the apostles, including the healing at the temple gate of a man who was lame from birth. After this healing, the people were utterly astonished, and when Peter saw this he said to them, “Why do you wonder at us, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?” And then Peter confronted them with the painful truth. The one whom they had rejected and handed over to Pilate to be put to death, God had *raised* from the dead. And then Peter added, “To *this* we are witnesses... And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.”

Once they were afraid and disbelieving. Now, nothing could keep them from witnessing to what God had done through Jesus Christ. “To this we are witnesses,” said Peter. “I know that you acted in ignorance... Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

You *are* witnesses. Each of you. Everyone here this morning who has been touched by the risen Christ in some way, who has heard the Easter story and come to believe, each one of us is *already* a witness. And it’s a good thing, too, because there are so many who have never heard the good news.

Question: What is 750,000 miles long, could wrap itself around the earth 30 times and grows at an average of an additional 20 miles with each passing day? Answer: The line of people who do not yet know Jesus. *You and I are witnesses!*

Now it can be a little daunting to think in those terms, of course. I know it can be a little scary to actually think of ourselves as *witnesses* of Jesus Christ. Certainly a part of us is afraid of how

others may react. And *just* as intimidating, sometimes, is the fear that we don't know all that we *should* about Jesus in order to truly be *effective* witnesses.

But who can others turn to in order to learn about Jesus, if it's not us? How can Jesus reach out to this troubled and hurting world in love and forgiveness, if it's not *through* us? When guests enter through the doors of Hope Lutheran Church, or send their children to Hope Christian School, or when they encounter us out in the community and come to find out that we are Christians, they're expecting *witnesses*: that is, people who know something of what they talk about and say they believe.

A photographer for a national magazine was once assigned to get photos of a great forest fire. Smoke at the scene hampered him, so the home office arranged to hire a plane at a nearby airport. He raced over there, saw a plane warming up on the runway, jumped in with his equipment and yelled, "Let's go! Let's go!" So the pilot sent the plane speeding down the runway and into the air. Once airborne, the photographer yelled, "Fly over the north side of the fire, and make three or four low level passes." The pilot turned to him with a panicked look on his face. "Why?" asked the pilot. "Because I'm going to take pictures," yelled the photographer. "I'm a photographer and photographers take pictures!" After a pause, the pilot said, "You mean you're not the flight instructor?"

Sometimes in the church, I think, we're a lot like that pilot-in-training. We're out there on the runway, with the engines warming up, but we're afraid to take off. But "you *are* witnesses," said Jesus. "We *are* witnesses," said Peter. Not "witnesses-in-training," but full-fledged witnesses by virtue of our baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We just need to claim that identity, overcome our fears, let the throttle out, go full-speed ahead and get airborne. And if those fears still linger, just remember... Jesus said that he would be with us always.

So back to my Yellow Freight story... Well, I guess you've already concluded by now that the Teamsters never got around to fitting me for those concrete boots. It turns out that when I was interviewed by the company lawyer, he soon realized that, because I had been *so new* on the job the day those guys had booked-off sick, I couldn't really match up any of the names and faces. And once they were fired, of course, I never saw them again. So he concluded that if he were to ask me to testify at the hearing, I would not be able to identify that a "John Doe," for instance, was any of the men sitting across the room from me. The union lawyer would have made a "monkey" out of me, just like Archie Bunker warned.

So they left me home. I was deemed a *liability* to the company's case and, therefore, a poor witness... Although, it *did mean* that I was never fitted for those cement boots!

In the years since, however, I have often thought about that experience in terms of being a witness for Jesus Christ. And it has always been my prayer – when the time came for me to be a witness for Christ – that I would *not* be a liability, but rather could speak with clarity and with confidence about what the risen Lord has meant in my life. Again, that's all we're asked to do...

Oh, and in case you're interested, the remaining evidence against those dock workers was still pretty overwhelming – despite my liability as a witness – and so the firings stood. In the end, even the mighty Teamsters Union couldn't save their jobs. And that, I suppose, reminds us of some more good news as well. That is, we don't ever have to fear that our personal failures as witnesses for Christ are going to somehow *undo* Christ's mission in the world. You see, despite our own liability to Jesus' cause at times, the testimony of God's love and forgiveness is simply too overwhelming. And, in the end, *nothing* can thwart God's gracious plan to redeem the world through his Son... Amen.

