

A lawyer dies and goes to Heaven. "There must be some mistake," the lawyer argues. "I'm too young to die. I'm only 35." "Thirty-five?" says Saint Peter. "No, according to our calculations, you're 82." "How'd you get that?" the lawyer asks. St. Peter replies: "We added up your time sheets."

What does it mean to bear witness?

A witness, of course, is someone who has seen something, been a party to something, or who has expertise about something, and who shares their testimony when called upon. There are witnesses to accidents, who may have simply been in the area, or perhaps may have been involved in the crash. There are witnesses to a crime, who may have been an accomplice, a victim, or an innocent bystander. And then there are witnesses like timesheets that document work that (in theory) was supposedly completed.

Ones who bear witness are those who provide evidence, who have seen or experienced something and then tell what happened, and their testimony comes from their own perspective. Which is why one single event can have witnesses who describe that same event very differently, and why multiple forms of evidence are often needed to prove or disprove facts at a trial.

Those of you who have had kids know how a trail of toys and blankets and crumbs inevitably get strewn around as your little darling passes through each room. At our house, whenever I ask who is responsible, I get the same reply, "Not me." My favorite response is, "Not me – that is the cup I always drink at the table where I always sit, but I don't know anything about how that cup got there." (It's not too different from Peter's words as he denied Jesus on Good Friday. When the bystanders pointed him out as one of Jesus' followers, his response was 'Not me. I don't know what you're talking about.')

Here we are Easter evening, locked away in a room in Jerusalem, and Jesus suddenly appears. What strikes me is that he's amiable, without a trace of anger or disappointment that his friends deserted him and denied him just a few days prior. He seems happy to see them, to be among them, to reassure them of his continued fidelity. "Peace be with you," he says.

And they are dumbstruck: what is this apparition before them? Hadn't their leader just been killed? They are in the throes of grief ~ what they had learned and experienced with Jesus had to be reconciled with the reality that he was dead. And these stories from the women who visited the tomb that morning? They said the stone had been rolled away, the body gone, and two men in dazzling clothes who reminded them of Jesus' teachings and promises. And what of the pair of disciples who said they had seen their risen Lord on the road to Emmaus and broke bread with him later that day?

But now here he is. And they are all startled, terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost. (I suppose it's easier to know what to do with an executed leader than a resurrected one.)

It was hard enough to rely on eyewitness accounts that death had no hold on Jesus, but to witness it themselves? His hands, his feet ~ still freshly wounded. This experience was naturally bewildering. Both in the sense that it was confusing and disorienting, but also in the sense that they were being thrust into a new, unexplored spiritual reality that was opening up to them. Truly **bewildering**.

It seems the eyewitness accounts from earlier in the day and Jesus appearing among them was not enough for all who were gathered to believe. So Jesus adds to the evidence saying, "Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."

It is astounding. After all, this is Jesus who could make a leper clean, he could give hearing to a man born deaf and sight to one born blind. Jesus who could feed the multitudes with a little bread and fish. Jesus who walked on water, calmed the storm, raised the dead. Jesus who could heal the centurion's servant without even coming under his roof or stepping foot in his yard. Jesus, who in so many ways had shown that his power was unlimited, chose to limit himself ~ the Son of God, who died for the sins of all, and who has risen for the blessing of all, because God loves us all. Astounding, and bewildering.

Jesus wants the disciples to understand the reality of the resurrection. He will not remain with them always. He will return to the right hand of God the Father. Jesus will once again transcend time and space as he did at creation and through all time up until his being born in Bethlehem. But for now he stands before them bodily resurrected and he wants them to understand the miracle that has just occurred.

Yet even this is not enough evidence for all of them. They know that Jesus is dead. Rome knows how to kill people, of this Jesus' followers are certain. When Rome kills someone, they are professional about it. And dead people stay dead. These facts are so well established that they are difficult to overcome.

“Have you anything here to eat?” he asks.

Apparitions don't eat. Jesus' physical presence bore witness to the reality that God's love for God's beloved is stronger than even death.

Earlier this week, I got to bear witness to an adult baptism. Greg Lobikis, who has been worshipping with us for a few years now, was baptized on Monday, and we welcomed him into the household of God. I am blessed to have been able to witness his affirmation of faith, and witness his vows to follow and obey Jesus Christ his Lord, putting his whole trust in God's grace and love. Greg has experienced transformation by God's grace, to which he chose to bear witness through the sacrament of baptism. It was beautiful.

Greg himself now bears the ongoing responsibility to provide witness to the Truth of the Gospel. He is burdened with the responsibility to proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ. Even when it's not convenient, or easy, or fun. Just like the first disciples, he now is called to bear witness to a resurrected Christ.

Thanks to our COVID restrictions, it was a simple, small service. And it was beautiful, have I mentioned that?

My joy fizzled a bit when I got home that afternoon ~ I saw in the news that there had just been another school shooting. More senseless loss of life. More thoughts and prayers. More pointing fingers. More childish side-stepping, more “but they played in the pillow fort, too, so I shouldn't have to put the blankets away” kind of blame and lack of responsibility.

Violence, hate crimes, discrimination, poverty, continued disenfranchisement of marginalized persons ... more truths that we must to bear witness to.

We live in a world where two realities are in constant tension: the brokenness of the human condition and the wholeness of grace which is freely given to us; the fragility of the human psyche and the strength and resiliency of our God-given soul.

As an Easter people, as witnesses to and active participants in the Jesus Movement, we are to work toward building God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. We are called to be agents of healing and grace and reconciliation and peace, because this is Ultimate Reality which is good and true and lasting. Breaking down barriers, honoring the personhood of everyone we encounter, working for justice and peace in the world, and seeking and serving the Christ in others ... this is who we say we are, and this is what we say we're about. As we have been formed and informed by the witness of these early disciples, so future generations will be observing how we choose to live and speak and behave as ambassadors of the living God. Are we bystanders to God's activity in the world, or do we actively work toward doing God's work in the world? Do we merely lament the hurt places in the world, or are we engaged in the hard work of healing and peacemaking, reconciliation and hope-spreading? Are our baptismal vows a crutch for feeling ok about ourselves and our relationship with God, or do they motivate us to be the change we want to see in the world?

Going back to that lawyer joke a few minutes ago, what does our spiritual timesheet reveal about our priorities and how we spend our time? There is a lot going on in the world around us ~ both good and not-so-good. What testimony will our lives and our words reveal about our faith in the resurrected Christ?