

Easter 2A Message March 30, 2008

1st Congregational United Church of Christ, Phoenix, AZ

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; 1 Peter:1:6-9;John 20:19-31;

Message: We are Witnesses ©2008 Rev Dr Stephen Wayles

We are witnesses declare today's and Easter Sunday's lessons from Acts 2 and Acts 10:39 ff. "And we saw it, saw it all, everything he did in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem where they killed him, hung him from a cross. [40] But in three days God had him up, alive, and out where he could be seen. [41] Not everyone saw him—he wasn't put on public display. *Witnesses* had been carefully handpicked by God beforehand—us! We were the ones, there to eat and drink with him after he came back from the dead. [42] He commissioned us to announce this in public, to bear solemn *witness* that he is in fact the One whom God destined as Judge of the living and dead. [43] But we're not alone in this. Our *witness* that he is the means to forgiveness of sins is backed up by the *witness* of all the prophets."

Peter got up and told the truth as he saw it. *We are witnesses*... The first order of business for any witnesses in court is their swearing in: "Do you solemnly swear to tell the ... the whole...truth and nothing but thetruth, so help you God?"

In the gangster movie, the guy was caught with another woman by his girlfriend and was trying to talk his way out of it: "But honey, what makes you think I'm lyin'?" And she responds as she raises the gun "I know you're lyin cuz your lips are movin."

Some people can't tell the truth if they work at it. If you didn't see "Liar, Liar" with Jim Cary – it's a bit rough – but he's a guy who just can't tell the truth – a total disappointment to his son because dad, who ran off on his mom, never shows up where he's promised to be. One day the son was granted a wish and a spell is cast on Cary's character and for 24 hours, he cannot tell a lie – he is brutally honest with everybody

about everything – The rough language and scenes do issue in a happy ending and a reunited family.

“We are witnesses” means first that we are supposed to be telling the truth about Jesus – as we see it. Witnessing to the truth can be dangerous business!

I remember an internet story about a Mississippi grandmother being put on the stand – and with some people, if you don’t want to know exactly things as they see it, you’d best not ask.

In the trial in a very small-town, the prosecuting attorney called his first witness, a grandmotherly woman to the stand. He approached her and asked, 'Mrs. Jones, do you know me?' She responded, 'Why, yes, I do know you, Mr. Williams. I've known you since you were a boy, and frankly, you've been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat, and you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you're hot stuff, but you haven't the brains to see you'll never be anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes, I know you.'

The prosecutor was stunned. Not knowing what else to do, he pointed across the room and asked, 'Mrs. Jones, do you know that defense attorney?'

She again replied, ' Why yes, I do. I've known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, too. He's lazy, bigoted, and he has a drinking problem. He can't build a healthy relationship with anyone, and his law practice is one of the worst in the entire state. Not to mention he cheated on his wife with three different women. One of them was your wife. Yes, I know him.' The defense attorney was horror stricken!

The judge asked both counselors to approach the bench and, in a very quiet voice, said, 'If either of you asks that woman if she knows me, I'll see that you both get sent "up the river" for life, with no option for parole!'

As you can clearly see honest witnesses really have an effect the outcome of any story. Today's Acts account happens about 6 weeks after Jesus' crucifixion. 6 weeks ago, when Jesus was on trial inside the court, Peter was put on the stand out in the courtyard by a young servant girl: "Do you know *him*? I saw you with this Jesus of Nazareth. You've even got that Galilean accent." Tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth! And Peter responded "I don't know him. I never knew him. I never saw that man before in my life." Then rooster crowed twice! And when it crowed, the Lord looked out at Peter – and Peter wept.

Today's Acts lesson occurs 7 weeks later, right after the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all the disciples and everyone else in the neighborhood. And now Peter is the star witness – telling congregations of thousands what he had been afraid to tell the servant girl, that he did know this Jesus and he told every true thing he knows about Jesus his teaching his healings, his message of God's love for all people, his trial, death and resurrection from the dead and his appearances to all of them. Something had happened to make this coward brave and this liar into a reliable witness! And the something that happened was a two-stage event of 1) Christ's resurrection and 2) the giving of the Holy Spirit. The resurrection canceled his fear of dying. The gift of the Holy Spirit – God on the inside canceled his fear of living and filled him with courage and a purpose for living! That was Luke's account of the story.

John is another witness, who remembers the details in a different way. Think of four people seeing an accident from each of four corners – or four sports fans seeing a play from four vantage points in the stands. A different perspective gives a different slant on the truth. One isn't truer. I'm glad we've got more than one witness! John remembers that On Easter morning, Jesus had told Mary Magdalene not to hold on to him because he had not yet returned to the Father – to his place in the Godhead – and that once that return to God was accomplished, would be able to be with God in heaven and remain with his disciples on earth forever thereafter. After Jesus' return to God, the Holy Spirit would be set loose on earth. Jesus sends Mary Magdalene from the cemetery, the first apostle, sent to preach, the very first witness of the resurrection – and to the first Pope, Peter!

In John's view, somewhere between Jesus' encounter with Magdalene outside the tomb and his evening entrance into the locked room on Easter Sunday evening, Christ's return to the Father has already happened – and now, he will found wherever his people meet and wherever people are in need. Thomas missed the evening service on that first Easter Sunday when Jesus came through locked doors. The resurrected and transformed Jesus now shows the disciples his hands and side – and now the wounds no longer have power over him. John remembers that it was then and there that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples – it's almost like a repeat of the creation story where God breathes his breath, the Spirit, divinity into the sculpture of a person and with God's breath and spirit, it becomes a living soul, a living being!

The apostles are hiding out in the upper room for fear that those who had Jesus crucified may do the same to them. When the glorified Christ breathes his Spirit on the gathered community, they are moved just like Peter in Acts, from the kingdom of fear of

dying –to a kingdom of hope and courage as witnesses to the resurrection. They tell Thomas - who missed this first Easter evening worship service. SThomas says he will not believe until he has the same tangible experience of the living risen Christ that the others had. One week later, the Sunday after Easter– today is the anniversary of this amazing event of Jesus meeting again with the disciples –this time the doors are no longer locked, just shut! The fear is abating because Christ is near.

Jesus appears through the shut doors. This time Thomas is there and is invited by Jesus to touch the wounds of the glorified Christ. To me it's important that there is nothing shameful or embarrassing to God about Jesus' wounds, still visible in the risen and glorified Christ. His wounds are transformed from the marks of ridicule and shame to badges of honor. Christ has battled and defeated death itself to get these scars!

Thomas declines to put his hands in the wounds. While Thomas may be squeamish about the scars, he is anything but timid in his witness. He looks to the risen Christ and he acclaims "My Lord, and my God!"

That's the bookend of this Gospel. At the beginning John had said "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God – and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory...." And now after Thomas and the rest of us have listened to Jesus with all of his "I Am" sayings - I am the bread of Life. I am the Light of the World. I am the Way and the Truth and the Life" I am the Resurrection and the Life," and after we've walked through trial, death and resurrection with him, we are asked to make a decision about which *truth* it is to which we are witnessing. While there are many Christologies – many words and understandings about Christ in the New Testament, this one of Thomas the former doubter, is the highest

in the Bible. When Thomas gets over his doubts and becomes a witness, he goes whole hog, addressing the risen Christ as ‘my Lord, my God!’

Church tradition has it that Thomas’ witness took him far and wide. There is an apocryphal book called the Acts of Thomas. The apostles had been sent by Jesus into all the world, and the lot for Thomas fell to India. (The Mar Tomas Church of South India does trace its origin to Thomas. Thomas had argued with his call: “I am a man of the Hebrews. How could I go to India to preach?” The risen Christ, however, appeared to challenge Thomas, saying: “Thomas, go unto India and preach there, for my grace is with you.” Thomas still refused. “Wherever you want to send me, send me... but to India I will not go.” As it happened a trader from India, Abbanes, was in Jerusalem. He had been sent by King Gundaphorus to find a skilled carpenter to build a palace in India.

Thomas was a carpenter. So the risen Jesus went to Abbanes and asked, “so you want to buy a carpenter?” “Yes”, said Abbanes. Jesus said, “Well, I have a doulos a servant, a slave that is a carpenter and I want to sell him. (Jesus pointed to him). So they agreed on a price and Thomas was sold and it was written up “I, Jesus the son of Joseph the carpenter, acknowledge that I have sole my slave Thomas unto thee Abbanes, a merchant of Gundaphorus, King of the Indians. Jesus took him to Thomas. Abbanes asked “Is this your master?” “Indeed he is.” Said Thomas. “Abbanes said “I have bought you from him.

After Thomas said his prayers he said to Jesus “I will go wherever you want me to go.” The story goes that Gundaphorus ordered Thomas to construct a palace. The king gave him lots of money to buy materials and pay the labor, but Thomas gave it all to the poor. The King kept after him, suspicious about his progress on this “emperor’s new

palace” and finally asked, “Where is my palace? When shall we go see it?” Thomas then informed him it was not a palace that could be seen, but when you depart this life, then you will see it.” At first the king was angry and Thomas was endangered for his life .

However, it was then that the King became Christian

Some say that Thomas was in India for years before this first convert to Christianity. Of all the apostles, Thomas was the perfect witness to bring the Gospel to the doubter and skeptics of India – having known his own struggle to believe.

“We are all witnesses, said Peter. That’s, in fact, what Jesus told us all (Acts 1:8). we are his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. So what does “witnessing” look like?

Well, it’s not just talking about our religion to others. That would put us in the very place of the people Jesus most preached against – those who made their religion to be about absolute beliefs and rules and laying heavy burdens on people. Talk was cheap even back then. Notice that Thomas in India wasn’t just *talking* about Jesus. He was, in fact, using his new master’s money for the poor! While witnessing includes telling the truth, it is much more than that. To witness is not just to say who Jesus is and say what Jesus says. That’s the cheap grace new revised version of witnessing –getting other people to believe what I believe – and telling them that God will fry them in hell if they don’t – and then calling that “the Gospel” the Good News of Jesus!

March 25 Boston Globe reported that Bishop Gene Robinson of New Hampshire is told he should be wearing bullet proof clothing because of those who would kill a gay bishop. The reporter wrote “For his own part, Robinson says he is not fearful, although he believes his life is at risk because of his visibility and the controversy over his

sexuality."I'm not afraid, I'm just realistic. There are angry people, and there are crazy people out there. And as far as we know, not a single one of the disciples died of old age at home in bed. The kind of confidence that they felt after the resurrection just enabled them to go out and make their witness and then what happens happens, and that's the way I feel." *Michael Paulson Boston Globe March 25, 2008.*

To witness in Jesus' understanding of that term, "Witness" is evidenced all through the book of Acts where Jesus' followers – both those who knew him – and those who came to believe in him because of their words and actions – did what Jesus had always done for others - requires us to do what Jesus does for others – Yes we must tell who Jesus is for us because people don't know him. But remembering that Jesus never came proclaiming himself, but proclaiming God's reign on earth – here and now – including God's justice for the poor and God's care for the needy – and God's radical inclusiveness of all kinds of people – God's rehabilitation and release of the prisoners, God's use of us to care for the sick, the dying, the widow, the stranger, the immigrant and the orphan.

The Greek word for "witness that was on the lips of Jesus and Peter is "Martys/Martyreo" from which we get our English word 'martyr". Because those who continue Jesus' work and who act like Jesus in lifting up the poor or the outsider may pay the price of martyrdom, or like Rev Jeremiah Wright who has given his entire adult life to bring a church to life – that has done more than any other institution to lift up the poor people from the South Side of Chicago with jobs and training for prisoners and drug rehabilitation and real Jesus work, to have his character assassinated by news pundits, talk-show hosts on hate radio and political hacks who have never lifter a finger to help

the poor. He has taken on the systems and structures of power –both economic and governmental that have kept people down and lied to the American people about wars and prisons and drugs. He has called a bankrupt foreign and domestic policy into serious question just like his namesake the Prophet Jeremiah did in his day – and his character has been assassinated.

English Jesuit, Fr Paul O'Reilly tells of an English journalist who interviewed Mother Theresa. When he arrived, she was giving a talk to the new sisters about “the wounds of Christ.– she was speaking with great passion and conviction about the way in which Christ had entered, enlightened and transformed her life and the lives of many of the poor people she served.

When she finished, the journalist went up to ask her a question. “What do you mean by these ‘wounds of Christ’?” Mother Theresa said: ‘come with me’ and she took him into her hospice. They went all round it. It was a long tour through all the wards in the hospice. There was an enormous number of people, on beds, on mattresses, some just on the floor. Most were very old and very sick; some were clearly dying. All of them were being looked after - as best they could - by nuns and volunteers - all desperately busy and rushed.... There were a lot of people confused and suffering and another lot of people trying - not always successfully - but doing their best to help. Eventually, they came to the end. Mother Theresa turned to him and said: “There, you have seen the wounds of Christ?” And he said to her: “Well actually, No, I haven’t: I just saw some very sick people in pain and suffering and some other people not all of them qualified - trying to help. There’s nothing special in that.” And she looked at him very hard and said

“If you have seen that, then you have seen the wounds of Christ.” (told by Paul O’Reilly in internet 1st Impressions vol 2 for Easter 2, 3-30-08.

When Thomas saw the wounds of Christ – he didn’t say – well that wasn’t all that bad now, was it Jesus. He didn’t say “Well you brought it all on yourself – If you hadn’t been helping all those poor people and bringing in all those outsiders to the church...” No, Thomas saw the wounds and he said “My Lord, and my God!”

Our witnessing to the Christian faith is not about selling people eternal fire insurance policies so that the God who loves them won’t burn them up forever. Our witnessing is both telling and acting and seeing Christ at work in the world in ordinary and extraordinary ways.

It’s looking at these Mexican kids who have been here since they were five years old because we needed their parents labor – and watching the sheriff go after them like they were criminals – and seeing in that the wounds of Christ and it should make us say “My Lord and my God!”

.As part of the United Church of Christ, we sometimes feel surrounded. People question our theology, our interpretation of Scripture our motives for helping others – and yet what else can we do when we know Jesus and when his Spirit is in us!

That reporter said it was ‘nothing special’ what those people were suffering or what Mother Theresa those others were doing to help as best as they were able. Well I believe it was Christ in those people doing the helping. And I know it was Christ’s wounds that they were binding up because he promised “When you do it to the least, you do it to me.” And all we can say is “My Lord and My God.” And put on the towel and

we start washing feet – and we go to the legislature and we help and go to the hospice...

you get the picture. It's what witnesses do.