

³⁶ ... Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ³⁷ They were terrified and afraid. They thought they were seeing a ghost.

³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It's really me! Touch me and see, for a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones like you see I have." ⁴⁰ As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ Because they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, he said to them, "Do you have anything to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of baked fish. ⁴³ Taking it, he ate it in front of them.

⁴⁴ Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. ⁴⁶ He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

³ Peter and John were going up to the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon, the established prayer time. ² Meanwhile, a man crippled since birth was being carried in. Every day, people would place him at the temple gate known as the Beautiful Gate so he could ask for money from those entering the temple. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he began to ask them for a gift. ⁴ Peter and John stared at him. Peter said, "Look at us!" ⁵ So the man gazed at them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ Peter said, "I don't have any money, but I will give you what I do have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, rise up and walk!" ⁷ Then he grasped the man's right hand and raised him up. At once his feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ Jumping up, he began to walk around. He entered the temple with them, walking, leaping, and praising God. ⁹ All the people saw him walking and praising God. ¹⁰ They recognized him as the same one who used to sit at the temple's Beautiful Gate asking for money. They were filled with amazement and surprise at what had happened to him.

¹¹ While the healed man clung to Peter and John, all the people rushed toward them at Solomon's Porch, completely amazed. ¹² Seeing this, Peter addressed the people: "You Israelites, why are you amazed at this? Why are you staring at us as if we made him walk by our own power or piety? ¹³ The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of our ancestors—has glorified his servant Jesus. This is the one you handed over and denied in Pilate's presence, even though he had already decided to release him. ¹⁴ You rejected the holy and righteous one, and asked that a murderer be released to you instead. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, the very one whom God raised from the dead. We are witnesses of this. ¹⁶ His name itself has made this man strong. That is, because of faith in Jesus' name, God has strengthened this man whom you see and know. The faith that comes through Jesus gave him complete health right before your eyes.

¹⁷ "Brothers and sisters, I know you acted in ignorance. So did your rulers. ¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he foretold through all the prophets: that his Christ would suffer. ¹⁹ Change your hearts and lives! Turn back to God so that your sins may be wiped away.

In today's Gospel lesson, we heard an account of the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples, as Luke told it. It is similar to John's version that we heard last week. But there is one big difference. In Luke's account, it seems like ALL of the disciples acted like THOMAS did in John's rendering. They were ALL TERRIFIED AND AFRAID.

Apparently learning well from his good Jewish mother, Jesus dealt with the disciples' consternation by offering them something to eat.

And then, having relieved their heartburn, He begins to teach them – "opening their mind to understand the scriptures" – telling them everything written about Him in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. [Don't you wish they had written down that lesson?!]

After having explained all the scriptures of the First Testament, in light of Him, and after having appeared to them, as the conqueror of death – the first born of the new life, which each one bearing the Name of Christ is to receive as well – THEN, he concludes today's lesson with the admonition: **"YOU ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS."**

Sometimes – perhaps the better word is “often” – people can indeed be a WITNESS to something, but do not TESTIFY.

We remember too well the case of murder here in Charleston not that many months ago, where no one is (yet?) willing to come forward and testify to what they saw.

But, in the world of criminal law, when someone does step forward and testify to what they have witnessed, they will often come into contact with a lawyer, at some point in time. And if s/he is a good lawyer, they will prepare the witness for giving testimony in the courtroom.

And if s/he is a good lawyer, they will tell the witness that the most important rule of courtroom testimony is **ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH.**

I always loved it when I would prepare a witness for giving their testimony, and they would do so, and then be cross examined by an attorney for the other side – and that attorney would ask the questions: **Did you meet with Mr. Brown prior to giving your testimony today? YES, I DID. And did Mr. Brown prepare you for how to give your testimony today? YES, HE DID. And what did Mr. Brown tell you to say? MR. BROWN TOLD ME THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH.**

Cha-ching!

Well, Jesus was probably not talking about going into the court to be a witness. He was talking about – and in years gone by, we used to here it in churches – **“GIVE A TESTIMONY.”**

People don't so much talk like that in church anymore.

And sometimes, I know that preachers and other Christian leaders get upset because more people don't follow Jesus' commandment here: **TO BE A WITNESS FOR HIM.**

In fact, sometimes, I've heard preachers and Christian leaders sound a lot like Peter did in the “supplemental” scripture printed in your bulletin.

Peter and John had been going to the temple – this was after they had experienced the resurrected Lord. They were starting the new Christian Church, in Acts. A lame man was brought up to them, who asked Peter and John for alms. And Peter said, I don't have money, but I'll give you what I've got: **“IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST OF NAZARETH, RISE UP AND WALK.”**

And that's exactly what the formerly lame man did. And – guess what – that got some attention. So Peter saw the uproar and decided to give a little testimony. You can read his words in verses 12 ff.

Let me summarize – at least the TONE of what Peter said: **HE GOT INTO THEIR FACE.**

In our weekly lectionary Bible study, the Rev'd Harold Slate gave the presentation on this Acts passage. He wondered with the rest of our preacher group studying the Bible:

“In the face of such negatives, how do we present the Truth in a way that the message may be heard? A: Offer Grace instead of condemnation. Offer moments of peace and prayer. Offer forgiveness and prayer...”

Peter's get in your face kind of testimony – at least in today's world – is going to turn off more people than turn on. Unfortunately, it is the VOICE OF CONDEMNATION that so many people hear as the only Voice coming from the Church, which is why so many people would rather not have anything to do with the Church.

Last week, I went once more to teach at Pastoral Ministry Licensing School. I teach Pastoral Caregiving. I get to sell the book I wrote, because it's the required text. [Yes, 15-20 books a year, I'm building up my pension from the royalties!]

I give a homework assignment.

The first and last questions are the same: Tell the three rules for effective pastoral ministry. It's BOTH the first and last questions, because it's the most important part of the whole class. The correct answer is: **LOVE YOUR PEOPLE. LOVE YOUR PEOPLE. LOVE YOUR PEOPLE.**

One of the other questions is for the student to describe how s/he would give pastoral care in certain situations. They get to pick the situation. One student picked the case of the person having just been told by the doctor that they have terminal cancer. That student wrote:

In keeping with the three rules of effective ministry, I would sit the person down and tell them about how the Bible teaches us that sin is what makes us sick. I would go through the Bible to show them that. Then I would tell them that it is clear that sin is what caused their situation and what they must do to be saved.

That student thought that he was being loving.

You might guess that I went slightly ballistic – in the comments I wrote on his paper and in the words I had with the dean of PMLS, about how we could not allow a person such as this to pastor people.

Luckily, between the homework assignment and the beginning of the classes, he came to the same opinion and dropped out.

Christian testimony should always be **TRUTHFUL** and told with **LOVE**. It will also be heard much better, if instead of it being heard with arrogance or condemnation, that the person hearing it **BELIEVES** that it is being told **HONESTLY** and **LOVINGLY**.

When the worship committee was gathered to discuss this scripture – about 2 months ago – I made the comment that I wish people would follow Jesus' command to be a witness, as well as I gave testimony for my ROOMBA VACUUM CLEANER.

I had just gotten it for my birthday, in January.

It is wonderful. [I take the Roomba out and walk down to the main floor of the sanctuary and turn it on, while I explain how it works.]

The Roomba is a computerized vacuum cleaner that runs on its own. I can turn it on downstairs to clean the living room and breakfast room, while I go upstairs to go to bed for the night. It takes about 3 hours to do just those two rooms. It is incredibly thorough. It picks up dog hair better than any vacuum cleaner I've ever had. And when it's done, it finds the charger and goes and plugs itself in, turns off, and recharges.

I explain how many people I've told about the Roomba; I'm guessing I'd make more off Roomba commissions than book royalties.

Then, quietly sitting next to me, Mark Musick spoke up, after hearing me go on and on about the Roomba. He said:

"I don't tell people about my Roomba. I've had one for years. It used to work like Monty says. But, now, when I turn on my Roomba, it just goes out into the center of the

room, turns itself around and around in a circle and goes nowhere else. My Roomba just doesn't work. So I don't tell people about it, like Monty does."

In that moment, everyone in the Worship Committee had a revelation.

Monty was excited and told people about his Roomba, because it works. Mark doesn't tell people about his Roomba, because although it used to work, it doesn't do so anymore.

Roomba is like Jesus.

If Jesus is working in our lives, then we ARE going to be witnesses and tell people.

The problem is that for some people, Jesus just doesn't seem to do the job anymore like he used to. **BUT HARDLY ANYONE WILL ADMIT IT, BECAUSE THE CHURCH IS TELLING THEM THAT THEY NEED TO GET OUT AND BE A WITNESS.**

They don't feel like being a witness, because it's not working right. But they're afraid to speak the truth and to admit that it's not working.

The Church has created a climate where people are afraid to be honest and real.

Well, there's more to the Rooba story. Mark told me that having shared the truth about his Roomba situation, and having hearing how excited I was about mine, he went home and opened up the case on the Roomba and found an 800-Phone Number to call. He did and explained his situation. And they mailed him a computer patch that he hooked up to his Roomba. After sitting there and watching the computer patch do its thing for about 5 minutes or so, he turned on his Roomba and [here I turn Mark's Roomba loose in the sanctuary] it works fine.

Now the purpose of this example is not to sell Roomba vacuum cleaners.

The purpose is to alert us to how one of the very most important things we can do in the Church is to make sure we have a climate of non-judgmentalism, where people feel comfortable enough to share that while their Roomba/Jesus used to work, it's not working so well anymore.

Our Roomba/Jesus will not get better and begin to work, so long as we feel some sort of obligation to give a lukewarm AND FAKE witness of how important Jesus is.

BUT – in a loving environment, where people feel OK to speak the truth, where they will be met with love and grace, and not judgment – then people can help one another get their Roomba/Jesus back into good working order.

I can't tell you how many people I've encountered who ONLY need a safe place where they can be open and honest, and be met with love, and who are able to get their Jesus working once more in their lives.

THAT is how we are witnesses to these things – in being the Body of Christ that is loving, open, and truthful.

So may we be. So may we be.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.