

Sermon: April 12, 2009 Easter

Scripture: John 20:1-18; Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Title: "The Importance of Having Witnesses"

The attorney approached the witness stand. The witness seemed slightly nervous as he came closer. He tucked his chin down and looked at the witness through his bushy eyebrows.

"Now let me see if I understand everything you have been telling the court." He paused for effect and cleared his throat. "You have taken an oath to tell the truth, yet you wish us to believe that He is alive! Are you telling us that he did not die on the cross? That when the authorities gave you permission to take him down and bury him, he really wasn't dead.... That he managed somehow to"

"Oh no," she broke in "that is not at all what I am saying. He was dead. There was no life in him. The soldiers guarding the cross checked him out. They affirmed that there was no more life in him. And when we carried him to that cave hollowed out in the hillside and laid him on the cold stone, He was dead and as cold as that stone we rolled in front of the door."

"Well then, Mary, what you want us to believe is that a dead person came back to life, is that it?"

Mary looked around the room. It was getting more and more uncomfortable up there in that witness stand. The lawyer for the Sanhedrin was trying to twist her words. It seemed so simple to her. Jesus had been crucified. He died on the cross. Everyone there that day knew that to be a fact. The authorities released his body to his family and friends to bury in a borrowed tomb. They would never have allowed them to take him down from that horrible cross if they even suspected that he was not totally dead.

Ever since that eventful morning when she and two other women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others with them. Luke 14:10) had gone to the tomb to complete the burial process, the world had been turned upside down. They got there and found the stone moved and the tomb empty. At first they thought that the authorities had come back and taken the body away. However were they going to complete the burial process if they could not find his body. The herbs and oils had been prepared and they had come to apply them, something they could not do when they first placed him there, because it was the Sabbath. Their next thought was that some of the disciples had come and secreted him away so that they could claim that he was not dead. Even when she encountered Jesus outside the tomb and heard him ask: “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” She did not recognize The Lord. It was only when he uttered her name that things came into focus.

And now she was sitting before the most sacred of the courts of the land, the Sanhedrin.

They were conducting an inquiry into the rumors that were spreading like wildfire throughout Jerusalem and surrounding villages. Jesus, whom they had finally gotten rid of was reported to be alive, appearing to groups of his disciples and speaking with folks who were baffled about his crucifixion. The Pharisees and Sadducees could not agree on much, but this one thing they did agree on. Jesus was a threat to their religious authority. So, when they could not debate him out of existence, or cause him to incriminate himself, they had simply resorted to subterfuge to have the authorities exterminate him.

And so the inquiry continued. The lawyer for the Sanhedrin sat down and the chief Rabbi stood in all his fancy robes, tassels hanging down almost to the ground. “Mary,” the Rabbi spoke directly at the young woman before him. “ We understand that you were with a group of women who had gone to the tomb early

on the first day of the week. Is that correct?” Mary nodded her head in the affirmative. “And is it your testimony that these other women spoke with Jesus?” The question confused Mary. She could not remember if the others had spoken with The Lord. But she remembered that she had spoken with him. She did not want to get the other women in trouble with the authorities. All she could say was, “I do not know about the other women.” I can only speak for myself. Jesus called out my name and I turned and saw him.

The Chief Rabbi was frustrated. All he wanted to do was to discredit the stories, to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was just a hoax. The man could not possibly be alive. One last time he turned to Mary. “Think carefully now Mary before you answer, and remember you are under oath. Weren’t you having an emotional attack out there in the graveyard? Isn’t it true that you were involved with this man and that your loss caused you to have a vision? Isn’t it true that no one else has really seen this Jesus?”

“Oh no,” she cried out. A rumble of anticipation passed through the crowds that had gathered to observe the inquiry. “That’s not true,” she continued. “Many have seen him. Some have even touched him. He has eaten with us and taught us wonderful truths. I am not the only witness.” And then she abruptly shut up. She realized what she had done. Her words might have condemned others to being interrogated. Others might be vulnerable to persecution if their involvement was made known. Who knows what these religious leaders might do to those who followed the way of Jesus. She bit her lip and sat there quietly. But the Chief Priest smelled blood and he bore in on Mary.

“Who, Mary?” he snapped at her with such force that she began to shake. “Where are these other witnesses”? You could sense the antagonism in his voice. “Why have they left you up her all alone to take the heat? Why are all these other not stepping

forward?” He knew he had her now. And she shrank back and did not respond.

In the silence you could hear a pin drop. And then you could hear the shuffling of feet and the crowd parted. From all over the room people began to move forward. First a young man with the arms of a fisherman pushed through the crowd. Then another with the robes of a tax collector. Still an elderly man with a bushy beard. Then a young woman accompanied by an older woman who was still in mourning over the death of her son. Still others came. A man and his wife from Emaus stepped forward. The Peter, then John, then James..... they all stepped forward to testify. Mary Magdaline was not the only witness to the Resurrection. And if the Chief Priest wanted witnesses, he would get more than he had bargained for. When the shuffling stopped, close to 100 individuals stood in the middle of the room. And one by one they testified, “I saw him.” “I ate a meal with him.” “I walked on the road with him.” “I heard him teach.” And they all said in unison, “He is alive.”

And the voices have never stopped. For almost 2000 years the voices have sung out, “He is alive. I have seen him. I have experienced him in my life. I have talked with him and he has talked with me. He touched my life when I was in my greatest need. He lifted me up when I was hopeless. He fed me when I was hungry. He clothed me when I was naked. He visited me in prison. He came to me in hospital. He brought me back from certain death.” And all of these voices down through the ages shout in unison: He is Alive!

No high priest has been able to discredit them. No totalitarian government has been able to snuff out the voices. No persecution has been able to halt the march of the faithful.

And we stand in the long line of witnesses. Some of us have seen him face to face. Some of us have felt his power in our lives. Still

others of us have only heard the Good News and believed. But all of us are able to say, “He is Alive.” He is alive in His Church. He is alive in History. He is alive in God’s Heavenly Kingdom. But most of all He is alive in you and me. We are His witnesses, and it is important that we step forward and shout with all our being: “Christ is Alive.”

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