

“Witnessing the Resurrection”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Easter Sunday – April 16, 2017

John 20: 1-18

What is your favorite thing about Easter? Getting that new dress or suit to wear to church? Seeing the fragrant, colorful flowers displayed in the sanctuary? Eating all that chocolate in the Easter baskets, then having to go buy more to replenish your children’s Easter baskets?! Hearing the good news of the empty tomb?

This will not surprise most of you, but my favorite part of Easter Sunday is singing the familiar hymns and songs of the faith. Actually, singing is my favorite part of every worship service. And as Lisa will tell you, I am not a timid singer. Bless her heart – she probably has premature hearing loss from sitting next to me for thirteen years in worship. And whenever we have a Speedway community worship service, I pity anyone who has to sit between me and Dan Strobel from St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church!

I grew up in a house of singing. Both of my parents sang - my mom in the choir, my dad as the pastor. The familiar tunes and words of traditional and contemporary hymns were the foundations of my faith story. Whether in Sunday morning worship, or at high school church retreats, or at extended family gatherings, music and song were integral to my faith formation. I haven’t had formal training, though, so I am not confident when it comes to reading and singing harmonies - I can do one, and we sang it last week! But whenever we stand together as a people of faith, and we are led by the organ, piano, guitar and vocalists, those are the moments when I feel most connected to God in worship.

However, four weeks ago, I was sick. My head was all stopped-up, my throat was scratchy, and I was sucking on cough drops to try and not lose my voice. And when we started to sing the first hymn, I couldn’t sing. Nothing came out. Well, something came out, but it wasn’t intelligible. I realized very quickly that if I was going to have a voice for the rest of the morning, I needed to not sing. Coming to that realization was hard, and at first I was disappointed and sad.

That is until I listened. I heard all of you singing behind and around me. By not singing, my own voice was not in the way of hearing others’ voices. I could hear the tune and be attentive to the words in a new way. It was reassuring and comforting. And it reminded me that I was part of a community of believers, never alone in my faith or in my witness as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

This Easter Sunday, we do not come to the tomb by ourselves. We are part of a community of believers, a multitude of individuals who believe in something, who believe in someone. We are not called to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord as individuals. We are brought together by the hope, the promise, and the power of this day, so that we are not left alone, but united in our knowledge that life has conquered death.

Indeed, according to John, it wasn't one individual who first witnessed the resurrection – it was a multitude of believers. Mary Magdalene first came to the tomb, discovered the stone had been rolled away, and ran to get others. She found Simon Peter and the other disciple, who both came with haste to the place they had laid Jesus' body. Each of them saw with their own eyes the burial cloths, but no body of their master. After they left, Mary Magdalene encountered two angels in the tomb, asking her why she was weeping. And finally, upon turning around, she encounters the risen Lord himself, who instructs her to go and tell the other disciples what she has seen. She does as he tells her, and thus more and more become witnesses to the resurrection.

Whenever we hear the word “witness,” many times it is in the context of a crime: when a crime takes place, the police ask for witnesses who might have seen what happened. To witness something usually means we see or hear something occur, and through our seeing and hearing we believe it to be true.

But seeing is not always believing. Or more specifically, sometimes it can be hard, at first, to believe what we are seeing because of other things happening in our lives. Take Mary Magdalene, for example. When she turns around from the empty tomb, Jesus is standing before her. But she doesn't see him for who he is. She has just seen two angels in the empty tomb, where she had witnessed Jesus' body being laid on Friday. She is overcome with grief and shock and disbelief. She doesn't see Jesus standing before her. She sees a man who she assumes is the gardener. She begs him to show her where they've taken Jesus' body. Mary's belief is lost in her grief.

Jesus speaks her name, and like a curtain being pulled back from a window, Mary witnesses who is with her. She not only believes what her eyes see but what her heart trusts, calling Jesus her teacher, “Rabbouni!” Mary is given the voice she needs to tell the others what she has seen.

That's the other meaning of “witness” that we often forget. It's not only about seeing or hearing something. It's also about telling others what you have seen or what you believe. It's what happens in a courtroom – witnesses are called to testify as to what they have seen. It's also what we are called to do as disciples – to bear witness to what we believe. John actually concludes his gospel referencing this: “This is

the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true” (21:24).

After her initial doubt, Mary Magdalene knew that what she had witnessed was true, and thus she went and bore witness to others. We read that Peter and the other disciple believed when they saw the empty tomb, and they went and bore witness to others. (Holding up a Bible) This book and all that is in it is a witness to God’s love for us in Jesus Christ, and the saints who bore witness to what they believed. We are here today because our ancestors and their ancestors bore witness to what they believed – that the tomb is empty, that death does not have the final word, and that our Rabbouni has been, is, and always will be with us.

Today five young people will be confirmed as members of Christ’s Church. Two of them will be baptized. It is a special day for us as a church, as we confirm and remember the promise we all have received in our own baptism. For Faustina, Felipe, Sophie, Charles, and Matthew, it is their opportunity to be witnesses to what they have seen and heard and believe. Indeed, each of them have shared their own statements of faith with the Session, and in so doing, they have a taste of what it means to bear witness as Christ’s disciples.

As they are welcomed into full and active membership of Christ’s Church, perhaps this is a good opportunity for us all to remember why we are here. It is not solely to wear our Sunday best or to eat good food, although those are good things. It is not solely to hear beautiful, inspiring music, although that is a good thing. It is not solely to visit family, friends, or meet new people, although those are good things.

We are here today because we are a community of believers, who are called as witnesses to what we have seen, and to what we have heard. We are here today so we might hear again the good news that the women shared with the disciples: that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

And it is through that testimony that we bear witness to others. We teach a child the faith, when that child does not yet know the fullness of God’s love. We offer a helping hand to a stranger, when that person sees nothing but hopelessness in the future. We spend time listening to a friend, when that friend is struggling mightily with all that life brings. We hold the hand of the grieving, when that soul feels lost and sad. We give voice to those who cannot sing, and in so doing, we all bear witness to what we have seen and heard and believed.

It wasn’t just four weeks ago that I could not sing. It also was two weeks ago. As I stood to sing the opening hymn at my father-in-law’s funeral, my emotions prevented me from singing. My tears, my heartache, my grief kept me from joining that congregation who had gathered at First Presbyterian Church in Bloomington in singing one of my favorite hymns: “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.” I predicted that – I

anticipated I would not be able to sing. But it nevertheless made me sad.

So I listened. I listened to the voices of my wife, my mother-in-law, my children, my parents, and all of our family. I listened to the voices of so many of you who have travelled that day to support us and give thanks for Steve's life. I listened to the voices of a sanctuary full of believers, who bore witness to the resurrection hope we were there to affirm.

And I believed. Even though I could not sing, I trusted what we were singing. "Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away. Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day." Because others bore witness to the resurrection that day, my family and I were reassured of God's abiding peace and rest. And as such, we can be witnesses as well to God's transformative love in Jesus Christ.

"Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'" (20:18). So have I. So have you. So let us go and be witnesses to the resurrection.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.