

Witness: Noun or Verb

Labels are important things. There is no getting around it. We begin to attach labels to things almost from the earliest moments of our lives. We encourage this process in our children, how else are we to know what it is that they want? We teach them to speak by giving the objects around them names—labels so that we can communicate with them. And our culture and civilizations are based on this fundamental form of communication which comes from our ability to speak and to conceptualize ideas. Easter represents a fundamental break in the understanding what are the possibilities of life, of existence in the world. When the tomb was found empty on that first Easter morn, there had been some who thought that there was life after death, but many doubted it. Not all who were those that were learned or trained in the Jewish tradition even believed that it was possible for there to be life after death, or resurrection. But then the stone was rolled away, the tomb where Jesus was buried was found to be empty and although the details varied, the report was that Jesus had risen from the dead. Our reading this morning is from the gospel of John and it records two post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples he called to follow him. This first Sunday in the season of Easter the focus on these two appearance is usually on the disciple Thomas, on the fact that he is missing during the first appearance but present at the second. For this accident of fate, it seems that he will be forever given the name of doubting Thomas. And quite frankly, that is so unfair. The text describing these appearances begins on the evening of the day the tomb was discovered to be empty. Ten of the disciples have locked themselves into a room where they have met before because they are afraid. Jesus comes into the room—and standing among them—greeted them—probably saying “Shalom” which is usually translated for us as “Peace be with you.” Shalom is a traditional greeting used for many occasions, for hello, for parting, it is an expression which wishes total blessing and all good things— good health and well being spiritual for the one greeted and the one parted from. After greeting them, verse 20 tells us this: “After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.” Then, and only then are we told as the latter part of that verse: “Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” In verse 21, Jesus again gives them Shalom, and then gives them a mission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” For the gospel of John this corresponds to Matthew 28’s commissioning. And then in John 20:22 we find that Jesus bestows the Holy Spirit by breathing on them before he left them. Up until Jesus leaves them, we are not told that Thomas was not among those present. The text never says where Thomas was on that evening, or how long it was before he rejoined them. It only tells us that when the others told him “We have seen the Lord”, Thomas was not convinced. What he replied to this news is well known: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Because of these recorded words he is labeled “doubting Thomas”. Yet, didn’t the text tell us the ten had seen Jesus’ hands and side BEFORE they rejoiced that they saw the Lord? A week goes by, and although Jesus had told the ten that he was sending them as he had been sent, it seems they have not gone anywhere. They are again in the house with the doors shut, although now Thomas is also with them. Again, appears among them and again greets them with Shalom. But now he addresses Thomas individually, inviting him to “put

his finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Does the text tell that Thomas does these things? No. When Thomas receives the invitation “Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” In other words, Thomas’ doubts needed no more than what the other disciples had already received before they rejoiced. With all this focus on Thomas the issue of when he recognized the risen Lord, the commissioning of the disciples within this passage is overlooked. On the very day the he first appears our risen Lord commissions his disciples to go and continue the work of his earthly ministry. He sends them out to witness to continue his mission. And that ministry is one of peace, shalom, healing, wholeness, well-being, reconciliation. They were given the task of witnessing to this intervention of God into the way the world worked—at the most basic of levels—the barrier between life and death. All of our lectionary readings, including this one, involve the calling of disciples to bear witness to Jesus Christ. All three accounts call on believers to be brave in giving their testimony to what they know. The disciples in John’s gospel are behind locked doors, afraid, deeply in need of Jesus’ peace and Spirit in order to be freed to face the world outside their safe, cloistered room. The “mini” Pentecost or arrival of the Spirit in John does not seem to have the dramatic effect that is described by Luke in the narrative of Acts. Yet our reading from Acts 5: 27-32 which takes place after that event shows that these same disciples have definitely moved out of the closed room. In fact, this passage is not the first time they have been called on the carpet so to speak. They are standing before the council, the same council which was involved in Jesus’ trial, and the high priest in Acts 5:28 says: “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” Peter, who denied Jesus three times in the courtyard, not answers: “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” He goes on to testify to Jesus as God’s son who was sent to give repentance and forgiveness of sins. “And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” John of Patmos writes his revelation from exile. Giving truthful testimony can be costly. Telling your story, publicly, under oath, entails risk, a belief in a cause bigger than self and a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to dangerous forces. And that is exactly what a witness does—gives testimony to a truth in their lives. Belief is not something that can be forced. As Jesus told Thomas and the others on that first evening, there would be those after them, there would be those to whom they would testify that Jesus would not appear physically to show them wounded hands and feet—yet belief would happen. When Peter and the other Apostles’ appeared before the Council, or John of Patmos wrote what was revealed to him, they were testifying to truth revealed to them—they were witnessing. In each of the texts the truth to which they were witnessing was a newly revealed truth—the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In each situation, they were taking a stand based on Peter’s claim “we must obey God rather than any human authority.” We are called to be a witness to the empty tomb—to the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. That is a label we tend to place upon ourselves.

When we consider this how we do this act witnessing—of testifying to a truth—what we are doing is a verb—it is an action—it is a way of living. We witness to the empty tomb by living as Easter People who try to illustrate the teachings and imitate the ways of our risen Lord in all that we say and do in all the places that we go. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

