



April 8, 2018

Reverend Aaron Gordon

---

## “Trust the Witness” *1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31*

— The message of Jesus is transmitted through scriptures and through the testimony of eye witnesses and interpreters for our sake. To trust the witness is to admit that we fall short of God’s plan for us, and that we have a truly human, perfect sacrifice that atones for us all, so that we are acceptable to God.

He has risen! He has risen indeed!

It is the second week of the Easter season, where we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ! The resurrection is the key part of what makes Christians, Christians. Did you know that most Muslims and Jews believe in Jesus? Oh yes, they believe in Jesus as a prophet, and a teacher, and an all-around good guy. In addition, many agnostics and atheists believe that Jesus existed as a teacher, and an important historical figure. But what sets Christians apart from all others is that we believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Everyone who believes in Jesus believes that he died. But only Christians believe that Jesus rose again! And in doing so, Jesus made a way for all of us to access God!

By our faith in the risen Lord, we are saved from our bad choices, and given a chance to live with God forever. By our faith, we also become a disciple of the risen Lord Jesus, which comes with a very specific job. We are told by Jesus to share our witness or our testimony with others. We are told to pass on the message of salvation in Christ to all those we meet, going from generation to generation, throughout the ages. That is the great Commission Jesus gave all disciples in Matthew 28.

But there is much misunderstanding about what this witnessing or testimony is all about. Often, we call this evangelism which calls to mind loud, charismatic preachers telling people to “get saved.” But, I do not believe that words are enough

to pass on a testimony about Jesus Christ. In fact, I think words alone are meaningless without actions. I believe God agrees with me. Read the book of James if you disagree. James teaches us that, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

Dead faith is not sufficient to witness to the Resurrection of Jesus in this world. Only a life of Christ motivated actions leaves a good. That is a reason that the Word “Martyr” in Greek means witness or testimony! Martyrs as you may know are those that give up their life for Jesus. It is the ultimate faithful deed that witnesses that Jesus rose from the dead! What kind of witness would you leave behind on this earth if you died tomorrow? Would people see in your deeds that you believe Jesus rose from the dead? Would they trust your witness?

Some of you may know already, but this week my family and I travelled to Wisconsin, to bury my last living grandparent, my Grandma Lois. She was Ninety-Two years old. She was a believer in the resurrected Lord, and a lifelong member of the Presbyterian Church. As the family gathered together at the viewing on the evening before the funeral, we had a prayer with the pastor of my grandmother’s church, and then we opened the doors to receive friends and family who had come to pay their respects to Lois and offer condolences to my family.

Somehow, I found myself at the front of the line near the picture collage of my Grandmother near the door. Since I was right near the door, I became the unofficial greeter for the family, introducing myself and thanking people for coming. As people waited in line to talk to my relatives, I often asked folks how they knew Lois and they usually added in a story or two about her life.

She had quite an interesting life Apparently, farming out on the Bigfoot prairie in the 30s and 40s was quite a life to live. All the neighbors knew each other well and formed a pretty tight community. I learned about how Lois used to belong to all kinds of different “clubs” which were basically big card games that travelled weekly from farm to farm. She loved to play card games. She and my Grandfather Ken were also known for their love of going dancing on the weekend.

Folks remembered my grandma from different side jobs she worked during her life, when the farming was bad, or after my grandparents sold the farm in 1979. A few folks that came were from the church congregation she belonged to in

Harvard, Illinois, which was closest Presbyterian Church to the prairie. Some folks knew her from the retirement home she lived in after my Grandfather died.

I heard many stories from many different people. And I heard many people offer their condolences. But something stuck out to me. No one talked about how my Grandmother witnessed to Christ in her life. Even the pastor in her funeral sermon did not talk convincingly about how her life was a concrete witness to her faith, other than the fact that she accepted the seasons of life like we read about in Ecclesiastes, and had some other favorite scripture passages that gave her hope.

Perhaps being a pastor myself, I am overly sensitive to issues of witness and testimony, but I am really sad that at the viewing and funeral, my Grandmother's ninety-two years on this earth didn't witness to Jesus more clearly in the life choices she made. In fact, the closest mention I saw was in the obituary which stated that she was a Sunday School teacher at the church for a few years back in the day. That is something, I suppose.

This is a huge problem for me. For Christians, a funeral is not supposed to be simply a celebration of life. Nope, if you get your hands on the Presbyterian worship book, you will see the funeral service is called, "A service of witness to the resurrection." In other words, we are supposed to talk about the way a person's life created a witness to the resurrected Lord. We are supposed to talk about the witness we have received from God and the testimony of the person whose body we are burying. The funeral service is meant to be a service of evangelism.

Both of today's scriptures for this second Sunday of Easter are about witness and testimony regarding Jesus Christ. We've got doubting Thomas, who won't believe unless he sees Jesus's wounds. From this passage we get Jesus's famous statement, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Our second scripture is also about the witness to our risen Lord that was passed down from Thomas, and the women, and the rest of the Apostles. The whole first letter of John is explained as we read this sentence, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

Some people believe in the risen Lord without seeing him and touching his wounds. There are those of us who accept the witness that we have in Holy

Scripture, as transmitted by our relatives and the church over the years. These believers truly are blessed! After all, the scriptures alone give all the information needed to believe in the risen Lord. How great would it be if people read the scriptures and believed them without seeing Jesus!

I believe more often people are like Thomas. We believe what we see and what we can touch. If there are lots of people out there that are like Thomas, then how we witness to Jesus in our deeds is incredibly important! I know there were many people at my grandmother's funeral who are like Thomas and need a concrete witness to the risen Lord.

Unless something miraculous and unlikely happens, we can't see Jesus. We can't put our hands into Jesus's wounds like Thomas. In fact, the only way we can witness Jesus is to see Jesus in the actions of people who believe Jesus is the risen Lord.

The message from the scriptures this morning for us is that we should give some time and consideration to the witness that we give to Jesus Christ with our lives. The testimony or witness that we pass down to the next generation and the people we meet is of the utmost importance!

People spend so much time and energy making sure that their property is taken care of after they die. People think of this as their legacy. In fact, if someone were to die without a will of some kind, we might call them foolish or reckless.

What kind of testimony to Jesus will we leave behind? The funeral service is one of the few critical times in our lives where families come together and discuss spiritual things. Therefore, it is an important time to witness to those present. It is important to tell people the choices we made for our risen Lord.

My father's best friend was a man named Walter. Walter was my dad's business partner and a family friend for many years. For most of Walter's life he lived a selfish life. He was raised Catholic, and believed that he was saved by Christ, but his belief did not show much in his life. However, in his later years, his family relocated to Atlanta, Ga. And his son became a strong believer in Christ. Walter's son's faith witnessed to Walter, who made a dramatic life change. He began to live for Jesus in noticeable ways, seeking to be generous, and to pass on the message of the Risen Lord to others, including my family. This annoyed my father who is Jewish, but I think that is a good thing. Unfortunately, Walter was

killed about seven years ago in a motorcycle accident. At his funeral service, Walter requested that the service be a service of evangelism and witness, talking about his faith, and making a call for those who do not know the risen Lord to get to know him. It was powerful and moving. The actual life changes and deeds of Walter that he made because of his faith in Christ were highlighted. Those actions made for a witness that was believable. A witness that was more than just words, or actions without explanations.

What will happen when you die? What will happen when I die? Will our witness be believable? Will people see Jesus in our actions as well as in our words? God has done a lot for me in my life. God has loved me greatly, and I want to make sure that I use my funeral in a way that creates a believable and accurate witness to the Risen Lord.

So I am going to invite you to do an exercise with me. Over the next few weeks, the scriptures follow John's first letter to the church. And this letter is a letter of witness to a skeptical world. At the same time as I preach from this letter, I am going to sit down and plan my own funeral. I am going to try to make sure that the funeral proves with my actions that I believe in Jesus. The purpose of this is not to make myself seem awesome, but rather to make Jesus seem awesome. I both invite you and challenge you to do this with me.

I have two goals for this exercise. The first goal is to inspire us at whatever stage of life we are in to be a more believable witness in both word and deed to the risen Lord. The second goal is to help us see how God has loved us, and been faithful to us in all aspects of our life.

I will break up my funeral planning into two steps. The first step is to make a list of concrete ways that I tried to live my life for Jesus. That is the first step. I challenge you all to do this with me. Sit down sometime during the next week and make a list of ways that your actions prove that you believe in Jesus.

Next Sunday, I am going to take this list, and put it together with a statement of how I feel about the Risen Lord, and what he has done for me. But we can discuss that more next week.

Will people believe the witness we leave behind? Only God knows, but we can do our best to present a compelling witness to Jesus with our lives, especially with our funeral.