

People’s lives and hopes often hang on the testimony of EYEWITNESSES!

That’s true in a COURTROOM
where a man is on trial for murder.

The jury’s decision, and that man’s LIFE, depend on what those
witnesses SAW, and what they will SAY.

It was true in a dramatic way last week in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Somalia
where pirates held an American ship captain hostage.

The US Navy had to use eyewitness reports of its SEAL teams
to determine whether or not Captain Richard Phillips was still alive
and how to go about rescuing him.

This morning’s Epistle lesson brings just such crucial testimony to us.
I read to you the words of John, and EYEWITNESS of Jesus Christ...

READ THE TEXT

To qualify as an eyewitness, one must have DIRECT EXPERIENCE.

Courts will not admit “hearsay” evidence.
What the attorney will ask is, “Where were YOU on the night of April 19?”

A desperate mother whose child is missing in a dreadful SCHOOL SHOOTING
doesn’t want to talk to reporters who have come late on the scene as she did.

No, she seeks out teachers or other students who have been inside that school
but made it out...someone who was THERE...

“Have you seen my daughter? Is she OK?”

I WAS THERE! writes John. AND SO WERE ALL OF US APOSTLES.

**“We have heard...we have seen with our eyes...
we have looked upon and touched with our hands”**

Of all the Apostles, none had seen so much as John.

He and his brother James were among the first men Jesus had called.
They had left their fishing practice to live with Him,
eat and sleep with Him,
and follow Him as disciples for the next three years.

John, along with James and Peter, had been on the mountain where Jesus
was transfigured.

John was the one who sat closest to Jesus as they ate the Last Supper,
leaning close – right on Jesus’ chest! – to hear the Master’s words:

“This very night, one of you will betray me!”
“A new command I give you...love one another”

John was there in the Garden of Gethsemane, close enough to see and hear
when Jesus prayed his anguished prayers.

“Not my will, but thine be done!”

Later that night, at Jesus’ trials, after the others had fled,
he and Peter were the only ones to follow along. Peter, we know, stopped
by the fire in the courtyard...but John, we are told, went inside and
WITNESSED THE PROCEEDINGS!

When Jesus was on the CROSS, John was there...
standing close enough that Jesus could speak with him:

“Son, behold your mother!”

John it was who outran Peter on Easter morning, and so became
the first of the Twelve to see the empty tomb with his own eyes.

Finally, John was there with the others that night when Jesus, now alive again,
appeared before them with the startling invitation,

“Handle me and see...”

So now he says to his readers, like a man who has come straight from the
USS Bainbridge in the Indian Ocean,

“I was there! LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I HAVE SEEN!”

For that is what every GOOD WITNESS will do.

EXPERIENCE by itself is not enough...
a witness MUST TESTIFY!

It has to be that way in a courtroom.

For neither judge nor jury were present on the night in question.

Only the witness was.

If the witness remains silent, TRUTH and JUSTICE will die with him.

It must also be that way with JESUS CHRIST!

Even in John's day,

very few people had had any DIRECT experience of Jesus.

No one had any digital pictures or voice recordings.

If the truth about Jesus were to be known,

WITNESSES would have to speak out, or the Gospel would die with them!

But it is not always easy to testify.

WITNESSES run a great RISK.

They are at the mercy of those whose lives will be damaged by their testimony.

That's why many court cases in our day must be dismissed, and why some innocent people remain in jail...

NOT because there are no witnesses,
but because the witnesses are AFRAID!

Some of this country's most dreadful Mafia bosses have gone unpunished for that reason.

John and the rest of the Apostles knew their DANGER.

He and Peter and others had been arrested,
dragged before the Council in Jerusalem, and beaten.
They were ordered to keep their mouths shut.

But they refused.

They knew their danger, but they also knew their Lord and His power.
Peter stood up and said, **"We cannot but speak of the things
we have seen and heard!"**

So they continued to make their WITNESS.

The Greek word for WITNESS is the word "MARTYR".

Peter, Paul, and James and most of the Apostles finally paid the price of their witness with their very lives.
They became MARTYRS for Christ.

Still, the testimony of the best EYEWITNESSES does no good at all unless people believe it!

The book THE LION, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE, tells just such a frustrating tale.

In that book, 4 children from England are on vacation in a large, old house.

The youngest of them, Lucy, is hiding in a wardrobe cabinet when she gets into another world called Narnia unexpectedly, by magic.

She meets a faun named Mr. Tumnus, and sees some astonishing things.

But when Lucy comes back and tries to tell her experience, her sister and brothers do not believe her.

She's telling the TRUTH, but they won't ACCEPT IT!

We are sometimes like those children.

We read the Bible.

We hear the stories of eyewitnesses like John.

Yet often we are slow to believe what we hear.

Perhaps it is because the News John brings us is so very GOOD, the polar opposite of the BAD NEWS to which we are accustomed.

We're like the man who goes to his MAILBOX each afternoon, saying, "WELL, WHAT'S THE BAD NEWS TODAY?"

We know that life has "bills to pay" and we wonder when those bills will come due.

We've heard some BAD NEWS about God that frightens us – that He watches our lives and keeps account, that He is angry with sin, that He punishes and damns...and we KNOW it's all true!

So it is that when JOHN and others come along with the amazing GOOD NEWS that that same God has dispatched His own Son

to come into this world, to take our punishment upon Himself,
and to offer us eternal life instead...

IT IS VERY HARD TO BELIEVE!

Can God really have done that?

“HE HAS INDEED!” says John.

That which we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you...

John can offer nothing more than his testimony,
yet he adds, as if to allow his reader to test the truth of what he says,
**we proclaim... so that you may have fellowship with us...
we are writing this so that our joy may be complete.**

If John is telling the truth, and if we believe him,
there is something he says we shall experience for ourselves as a result:

FIRST, we shall experience FELLOWSHIP

Not the shallow, flimsy sort that depends on being the same color
having the same income
liking the same things.

No, but we shall experience the genuine FELLOWSHIP
found in Jesus alone –
the kind that binds people together though they are very different
though they do not always agree
and though there is sin and hurt.

BELIEVE this witness John, and YOU will find it...
fellowship with other believers and with God Himself.

SECOND, says John, those who believe the news about Jesus
and share it with others will have a JOY that cannot be matched anywhere.

NOT a shallow happiness that lasts only as long as everything goes right

but a solid JOY that cannot be extinguished even when everything goes wrong!

There is no greater JOY, says John, than the joy of being
a WITNESS to Jesus Christ.

Writing this to you, he says, completes our joy!

Let me tell you an experience of mine.

Seven years ago, I was visiting Fred Hagedorn, Joan's brother-in-law.
He was terminally ill with cancer, lying in his living room on a couch.

I visited during lent and was telling him about Easter coming.
He confessed to me rather sheepishly that he did not know what Easter was about...that he had never heard the story!

I was incredulous. Could it be that someone didn't know about Easter?

That afternoon, I told him the "old, sweet story".
The birth in Bethlehem. The life and ministry. The suffering and dying.
The resurrection morning at the garden tomb.

Fred listened intently.
A week or so later, he was baptized there in that living room.
He put on a suit for the occasion and insisted on standing up, even though he was frightfully weak.

Susanne Walters was my partner
who held the bowl of water, and later served up some
Baptism Birthday cake, complete with a candle on top!
We sang "Happy Birthday" to him.

Fred's joy had begun. Ours was complete!

How many people there are who are WAITING for that joy!

There is no greater need in the world today
than the need for faithful WITNESSES to tell the story of Jesus Christ.

The EYEWITNESSES are gone, of course.

Legends say that John was the last of the Apostles to die,
perhaps around the year 100 AD.

There are no more EYEWITNESSES, though their testimony is recorded
in the Bible.

But there can be EARWITNESSES.

Faith comes by hearing, AND ALL OF US HAVE HEARD John's testimony.

What will we do with it?

Will we BELIEVE IT?

And if we BELIEVE IT, will we also SHARE IT?

Most Christians, writes Richard Anderson, are

like rocket ships that sit, ready to be orbited, but...never launched from their pads.... like Christmas trees unsold...like paintings never hung, like a bridge never crossed...

We spend a lifetime, seemingly, studying God's Word, listening to His commands, but seldom do we really do what God has called us to do above all else – to preach the Word!

This morning I have told you.

We have all heard from an EYEWITNESS...and now we are called to be EARWITNESSES of the best news the world will ever hear.

BELIEVE the Gospel, dear friends,
and tell it to someone else with joy!