

I think the saying is, “This isn’t my first rodeo,” and it isn’t — this isn’t my first time preaching, though it may seem that way, — and it certainly isn’t my first year as a sports fan. As most of you know, I am a die hard University of Illinois football and basketball fan, and though I have lived here now eight years, because I have been a Chicago White Sox fan since I was six years old, I remain one of those, as well. The first baseball game I attended must have been about 1950 or so, and my first Illinois football game was in 1953; in both cases, I was in single digit ages, but I remember them both.

And back then, fans cheered when they wanted to cheer and kept quiet when they did not, but with the advent of the electronic scoreboards and even more so with giant video boards, cheering became something crowds were told to do, as though they were too ignorant to do so otherwise, or because somehow their cheering would help the home team’s efforts. I guess it has to do with trying to sell tickets for future games by creating an aura of excitement, but I still look down my nose at those text messages or celebrities saying something like, “Stand up and shout,” which as I recall at Illinois games, is said by some alumnus who is on, or was on, the TV show, “Parks and Recreation,” though I have never seen the show, and by our legendary Dick Butkus.

Heck, I stand up and cheer so much — well, there has been less cause for doing so in recent years, I admit, — I stand up and cheer so much at Illinois football games that I have consciously to think about saving my voice for Sunday mornings.

Stand up and . . .

If part of my sermons on Easter concern overcoming doubt for those who have doubts — and boy, was I grateful to God when a visitor leaving worship at Florence last week said that I had helped him cross the bridge from doubt to faith, — if on Easter I want to deal with the kind of doubt that Thomas displayed in our very familiar and annually appearing Gospel reading, I want to change topics, and turn to a message that I believe must be central to the Book of Acts, but that previously escaped me, which does not speak well of me.

That message, in one word, is *witness*.

As part of our benediction last Sunday, I used words Acts tells us that Peter uttered when he was at the home of a Gentile, Cornelius, a neat story:

Now we are those *witnesses* . . .⁴² and he has ordered us to proclaim this to his people and to bear *witness* that God has appointed him to judge everyone, alive or dead.⁴³ It is to him that all the prophets bear this *witness*: that all who believe in Jesus will have their sins forgiven through his name.¹

Notice that some form of *witness* appeared thrice in those three verses. In today's reading from Acts, Peter and others are before the Sanhedrin, the "Session" of the Temple, and Peter and the apostles declare:

²⁹ . . . 'Obedience to God comes before obedience to men; ³⁰ it was the God of our ancestors who raised up Jesus, whom you executed by hanging on a tree. ³¹ By his own right hand God has now raised him up to be leader and Saviour, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins through him to Israel. ³² We are *witnesses* to this, we and the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.' [*New Jerusalem Bible*]²

Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, by the same author, and we know that the gospels were written for a purpose, to generate faith, to generate belief, as stated in the last verse of today's reading, not to be biographies, and it has finally dawned on my dense brain that Acts was not written simply to be a history book, but *a call to witness!* Though we have heard about Peter last week and this, *a call to witness* is why I believe most of Acts, and we shall encounter more over the next few weeks, is about the

¹ Acts 10:41-43 (NRSV)

² Acts 5:27b-32 (NJB)

witness born by Paul, in my wife Patricia's estimate — and she used to be in sales — the greatest marketer in history.

So it may be premature for me to make the statement that Acts holds up Paul as the model which we are to follow, but we have already twice seen Peter make the declaration of *witness*.

And what I am saying, my friends, is that once we have crossed over that bridge from doubt to faith, *we are called to witness, to bear witness* to God's love as shown in Jesus the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. We are called to *stand and shout*.

Now, perhaps we are not called literally to shout — though I love the lyric in one of the more modern songs, "Pass It On," "I'll shout it from the mountain top, I want the world to know"; though we are called to *shout*, we have individual means of doing that shouting, such as through mission activity, such as through being Christ to those in need, and not being hesitant to say, well, let me tell an anecdote as I finish:

The other day I was calling one of the staff at Arizona Opera, with which I spend much of my spare time; she was not answering her phone at that moment, and I left a message that closed with what I mostly, though by no means exclusively, use with our church family and others involved in the presbytery; my voice message ended with, "God bless." When she returned the call and after we discussed the business for which I called, she added, "And I liked your closing; thank you."

I never know exactly how we are to "shout" when it comes to verbalizing; when I have handed out McDonalds gift cards for others to hand out to people whom they think might need the food, I have asked them to say to the recipient, "Jesus loves you." The combination of the card and those words is, I believe, a nice shout; "God bless you" is also a nice shout.

It is not *how* we *shout* that concerns me, it is only that we are indeed called, all of us, to bear *witness*, to *shout*, and the message of Easter we *shout* can be simplified to *God loves you; God loves all of us.*

And remember as you seek to shout, that as it was with Peter and the apostles before the Sanhedrin, so the Holy Spirit will be with you as you bear witness; so let us stand up and shout the Good News in whatever ways we can.

Amen