

The Third Sunday of Easter (4-18-21)

Close your eyes. Now, see if you can visualize the inside of the church. How many Easter lilies are there at the front of the church? What color shirt is Brian wearing today? And depending on which church you attend, St. Stephen or St. Luke during normal times, how many pews are there in the church? All right, you can open your eyes again.

You are witnesses of these things. You experienced them. You were present and saw and heard things that happened in this space. But can you bear witness to them? Do you pay enough attention to be able to tell anyone else about them? If you were called to testify in a trial, would you be a good witness? How much do you notice?

Did you notice how many verbs in today's gospel have to do with seeing and looking? Jesus says, "Look at my hands and my feet. See that it is I myself. Touch me and see for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet." And then he ate in their presence, inviting them to witness that too. And told them, "You are witnesses of these things."

Jesus calls his disciples to be witnesses to his resurrection. They are witnesses of that first great miracle, the fact that he rose from the dead. But more than that, they are witnesses to his continuing presence in the world. By words and actions, they testify that Jesus is alive and at work among his people.

In the reading from Acts for today, Peter steps into the role that he has been given by Jesus. He acts as a witness of Jesus' death and resurrection. And he tells his audience (--Who on this occasion are Jews. On other occasions, he holds accountable the other people that he's testifying to. The responsibility or accountability for Jesus' crucifixion varies depending on to whom the apostles are speaking.) But here he says, you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. He steps actively into that role. He has just healed a lame man and he assures those who witnessed the healing that he did not accomplish it by his own power. He's just carrying out the commission that he has been given to offer love and joy and healing through Jesus, and that's part of his bearing witness. He invites his hearers to witness the living love of Jesus' present in healing power before their very eyes. And he himself becomes a channel for Jesus' love.

Some time ago, I saw a really fascinating video on the Internet. It's a video about selective attention. And it shows three players dressed in white and three in black. And they move around, tossing a basketball back and forth among them. Viewers of the video are instructed to count how many times the players wearing white pass the basketball. I will tell you, as one who has done it, it's surprisingly hard to do, to count how many times the players in white pass the basketball.

The trick, though, is what else goes on besides the basketball passes. As the players are passing the ball, a man in a gorilla suit walks right through the middle of the game. Very few people who perform the required task of counting passes notice the gorilla.

When I had watched the video and then was informed that a gorilla had passed through, I'm like, *no, there was no gorilla*. Then I watched the video again looking for the gorilla, and sure enough, there was a man in the gorilla suit walking right through the middle. Matter of fact, he kind of did this stuff, and did I notice him the first time through? No, I did not.

Is that test really fair? I mean, participants are given a task that distracts them. So, of course, they aren't expecting to be set up like that. Who expects somebody in a gorilla suit? And they're so focused on following the instructions of a rather difficult task that they aren't looking for any extra complications.

The people who are working with selective attention also did a real-world experiment, and this one took place on a college campus. They had someone ride a unicycle, a clown dressed in a clown suit. A unicycling clown is a pretty striking thing. And they watched the students who were talking on cell phones, students and faculty, just people walking their way across the campus. They even videoed the whole scene of students and people walking across campus with their cell phones and this unicycling clown crossing the quad. And then they interviewed people. They stopped and interviewed them and asked, did you notice anything unusual while you were walking? No, just the usual stuff. Virtually no one noticed the unicycling clown. In both of these experiments, people fail to see what is happening right in front of their eyes. Striking things took place, and they simply failed to notice them.

Now, obviously, we can't focus on everything at once. There's too much going on around us. Selective intention is important as anyone with attention deficit disorder can bear witness. When you're trying to pay attention to everything that happens around you, you don't focus on anything. Right? But there's the question, what do we choose to focus on? And what do we see happening around us?

The fact of the matter is that Jesus is at work in the world around us all the time. Intervening in people's lives, bringing hope and love and healing. Changing the world one person at a time. But much of the time, as far as we're concerned, he's the gorilla walking through our midst.

We're too busy counting passes and talking on our cell phones to notice that Jesus is right there among us. He's there, but we're just not paying enough attention to him to be aware of it.

But Jesus says you are witnesses of these things. Noticing Jesus' ongoing work in the world strengthens and deepens our faith. We're not encouraged and inspired by what we don't pay attention to or notice, but what if we start looking, if we start listening, if we start paying attention and asking, Where do I see Jesus? Is there a unicycling clown coming through here or am I just on my cell phone? You know?

If we open our eyes, then we also open our hearts to allow Jesus to work in us so that we can be changed by what we see, what we experience. This passage from 1 John in today's readings is one of my very, very favorite passages of scripture. I can give Brian advance warning that at my funeral I want this passage to be one of the passages. *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are. Beloved, we are God's children now. What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this, when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*

There have been a lot of studies of the importance of seeing face to face and particularly of babies, that stage where babies focus on faces. You're in the supermarket in the pre-mask days and a baby is in the line ahead of you and just staring at your face. And you hold a baby, and the baby is just glued to your face. Babies learn their facial expressions from the expressions of others. They learn to

speak by watching mouths. They learn meaning by watching faces. And that focus on the face is absolutely critical. They develop into full human beings who fit into their families by watching faces. They become like what they focus on. And what the passage in 1 John says, is that we become like what we focus on, and that when we see Jesus, face to face, we will become fully like Christ. That process can begin now. We are transformed as we turn our eyes on Jesus, as we notice Jesus among us. Jesus right here in the here and now.

I'd like to conclude by praying again the collect of the day. Did you notice as we read it? "Open the eyes of our faith that we may behold him in all his redeeming work, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen."