[Acts 3:12-19](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=88" \l "hebrew_reading" \t "_blank)

[Psalm 4](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=88#psalm_reading)[1](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=88#epistle_reading)

[John 3:1-7](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=88#epistle_reading)

[Luke 24:36b-48](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=88#gospel_reading)

BEARING WITNESS Sermon for April 15, 2018

Our gospel selection for this morning is Luke's account of appearance of Jesus to his disciples in the so-called upper room, and there are many, many interesting and wonderful things that happen during this visit. Jesus refers to himself as the Christ for the first time, telling us that the man, Jesus, has now fully assumed the title of glory by which he has been called ever since.

He also gives the disciples their assignment, fully revealing the reason for which he has been training them during the years they've been together, that they should carry the Good news to the entire world.

Something else that happens during the visit that I particularly enjoy reading about is the length Jesus goes to assure them that he's not a ghost or an hallucination or something along those lines. The great spiritual truth being communicated here, of course, is that we all now have an advocate in heaven who is not only a spirit, but someone of flesh and blood, just like us.

But the part I get a special kick out of is how Jesus begins his demonstration by using the same phrase I've used so many times in my own life, especially back in the footloose days: “Do you have any food here?” I personally suspect that Jesus wasn't just asking so he could make a deep theological point, but also because he was hungry.

And there are many other messages here as well, but what's I'd like us to do this morning is focus in on the last thing Jesus says in our passage. In our translation, what he says is: “*And you are witnesses of these things.”* (v 48)

This is a message that clearly struck home with the disciples who were there. From that moment on, they knew that their job, their responsibility, and their joy, lay in one thing, and one thing only: To bear witness.

That's exactly what Peter acknowledges in the passage from Acts we read this morning. He and John have just healed a poor guy who had been crippled from birth and reduced to begging to stay alive, but when everybody gets excited about it, Peter says, “Hold on, now. Whoa. We're just bearing witness.”

But now, let’s all hold on a minute. Peter and John were bearing witness? But they weren't preaching to this guy. They weren't telling him about how Jesus traveled around the countryside telling stories that were supposed to bring people closer to God; they weren't talking about the resistance the religious authorities offered to His message. They didn't stand over this poor man and describe how they saw Jesus arrested and tried, found guilty and executed on a cross. They didn’t offer him their personal testimony as to the great change knowing Jesus brought about in their own lives. And they certainly didn't talk to him about how Jesus came back from the dead and ate some fish with them.

And yet Peter describes what they did for this man as 'bearing witness.' If bearing witness doesn't mean talking about, the way a witness at a trial might give testimony to something she saw or heard, then what does it mean? And especially, what does it mean for us, who are also as Christians expected to bear witness to Jesus?

I think we get on the right track if we reflect on the fact that the Greek verb that's translated 'to bear witness' is the word 'marturon.' Does that sound familiar? It should, because we have the same word in English, and it's derived from the Greek word. The English word is martyr. So a much more literal translation of what Peter said to the authorities was, “We were being martyrs for Christ.”

Now when we think of someone martyring himself for Christ, we don't picture someone delivering a sermon about Jesus while being burned at the stake or torn apart by wild animals. What we picture is someone who has given his or her life to Christ and refuses to turn back from that, no matter what the consequences.

And I think that's a pretty good understanding of what it means to 'bear witness' to Christ. A man bearing witness to Christ is someone whose whole life is evidence of the fact that the spirit of Christ is alive in him, and that he is himself a member of the body of Christ.

We all know the old joke: How can you tell when a lawyer is lying? Because his lips are moving.

That's funny but part of what makes it funny is that it points in a humorous to a kind of disconnect between what's true, on the one hand, and what we say about what's true, a disconnect with which we are all familiar, and sometimes on a personal level.

The fact is that all of us lead our lives on two planes, so to speak. There's the plane on which we actually **are**ourselves, and there's the plane on which we **talk** about ourselves. And that plane includes what we say silently, in our own thoughts, to ourselves about ourselves. And there's plenty of room for humor as well as pathos in the distance that separates these two planes.

One of the names we have for that separation between who we are and what we say and think about who we are is 'bragging,' and you seldom meet people for whom this is not a temptation. I personally brag about my prowess as a weight-lifter, but in this moment of special candor, standing behind the pulpit, I would advise any of you who have believed some of my stories about my weight-lifting achievements in the past to take them with a grain of salt in the future.

There. Glad that's off my chest.

So certainly bragging can have its humorous side, but what we must remember is that New Testament scripture takes it very seriously indeed, to the extent that Jesus points to it over and over as one of the principle dangers in the spiritual life of the Christian.

He puts it most succinctly in the Sermon on the mount when he says:

*Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. (Matthew 6:1)*

And he provides illustration after illustration. When you fast, don't let anyone know. When you help others, keep it to yourself, preferably even keep it from the person you're helping. When you pray, do it in private.

Is he concerned here with the human tendency to puff oneself up, brag a little, blow one's own horn. Sure, probably to some extent. But much, much more importantly, what Jesus is saying is that what matters to God – indeed, the only thing that matters to God – is who one really is and how that shapes one’s life, not with what one says about who one is.

Just a little later in the sermon, after giving us these illustrations, Jesus again sums it up and states the principle of it when he says:

*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal;****20****but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. (19-20)*

Is he saying, Don't put up money in your 401-K? Of course not. What he's saying is that what the world thinks of you – what you've managed to persuade the world to think of you through your words and your self-promotion – is irrelevant, is meaningless, is in fact a distraction and a waste of your time and energy that might be far better employed simply in living the life that has been born in you through the grace of God and the work of Jesus Christ.

And that brings us in closing to the heart of the matter, doesn't it? What is the nature of this life to which we are asked to bear witness by living it? And I think maybe the best answer to that can be found in the opening verse of the selection we read from the first letter of John this morning, so I'll read it again:

*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!(3:1)*

The children of God.

When we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are born again. That is the central reality of existence in so far as we are concerned. The central reality of our existence is not the law of gravity or the speed of light or quantum mechanics or unified field theory. It is not the moral law or the civil law of the international law. It is not our profession or our hobbies or our favorite movies. It is not our family or our circle of friends. Those are interesting things about the universe and about us. But they are not our central reality, according to New Testament scripture.

According to Jesus, our central reality is that we can be, and as Christians, we are, born again.

But born as what? Channeling our Lord, John gives us the answer: as children of God.

And what does that mean? Let me quote a great Christian writer named Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

*Let us never again think of the Christian as just someone who is trying to lead a good life, trying to be a little bit better than somebody else, a person with a belief in doing certain things, going through certain forms and ceremonials and keeping certain regulations dictated by the church. Christians do all that, but before all that is this vital fact that they are children of God. They have been born again, born from above, born of the Spirit; they have received something of the nature and life of God Himself.*

Not everyone is blessed to have been born into a strong, stable household with parents who provided an atmosphere of reliability and discipline and strength of character and concern for others. In fact, those kinds of family seem to be harder and harder to find.

But one of the great pleasures of living in a small rural community where you can see multiple generations of the same family is that you once in a while get the opportunity of seeing a mother's moral character emerging in her children as they mature, or a father's strength being reborn in his offspring. It doesn't happen all the time, but when you see it and reflect on it, the wonder of is truly moving.

And here's what's important. In everything those children do in life, from the biggest things to the smallest, in every relationship they have, in every decision and choice, with every breath they take and every word they say, those children are bearing witness that they are the children of their parents.

And in a nutshell, my friends, that is what the New Testament teaching expects of us, as Christians, as children of God.

And so our special prayer for this morning, Father God, is that you help us be vigilant about ourselves, that you keep us in constant awareness of who we are and of what we represent, that we are not just your creation, but your children. Help us to keep our focus on others more than on ourselves. Give us the opportunities and the strength to make You proud of us, so that we can bear witness for you the way Jesus Himself did, for we ask it in His name.