

WITNESSES  
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April 12, 2009  
Easter Sunday

*We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:39-43).*

What a strange tale this is. A Jewish carpenter gets crucified for talking and acting as though he could do things only God can do, like forgiving sins and offering people eternal life. The authorities come to the obvious conclusion – that this man is either crazy or a blasphemer – and they arrange to get rid of him. So Jesus is crucified, dead, and buried. There are lots of witnesses.

But then a mysterious thing happens. Some people who know him claim they went to his tomb on the third day, and the tomb was empty. The body was missing. They think, somebody must have come and taken the body. How else to explain an empty tomb?

Then the really incredible thing happens. One of the women says she saw Jesus alive, standing outside the tomb. She runs and tells the men, but they think she's just a hysterical woman. That evening, as they're trying to make sense of it all, Jesus himself appears to the whole group and talks to them. They see him with their own eyes – all except Thomas, who isn't there. Thomas refuses to believe until he sees for himself. A week later, he does just that. He sees Jesus. He sticks his finger where the holes had been in Jesus' hands and side, then he falls on his knees and says, "My Lord and my God!"

In the days to come, more and more people claim to have seen the risen Jesus – altogether, something like 500 people. A few weeks later, many of them are gathered in one place and the Holy Spirit comes over them. Next thing you know there's a movement in synagogues and in homes all over the region, claiming that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

Even some who are hostile to Christianity change their minds. Saul of Tarsus tried to stamp out the church, but he says he was on his way to Damascus when he was blinded by a light, and a voice called out to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He spends time with some Christians till he gets his sight back, and then he see everything differently. He comes to believe that Jesus really is the Son of God. Under his new name Paul, he goes on to start some churches himself, and his letters to them make up a third of the New Testament.

That's the story of Easter in a nutshell. The question is, why should anyone believe it, and what difference should it make if they did?

As we said, it's a strange story. Those of us who have been in church a long time tend to forget that. But we need to remember, because we think it's the most important story in the world, and if we want other people to hear it, we should expect their first reaction to be how strange it all sounds.

The people who first told the story understood that. "A stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles," Paul called it. A dead man rising. All those miracles. A bunch of monotheists claiming that Jesus is God himself – the very Word of God made flesh.

The natural reaction among nonbelievers – and even among some of our own children and grandchildren – is to question the story. Most of their questions are obvious, but if we don't take the questions seriously and have reasonable answers, many of them will decide that Christians aren't very thoughtful people – even though there are a couple billion of us in the world today.

Some claim that the whole story should be thrown out on scientific grounds, as though modern science had somehow shown that miracles and the resurrection are impossible. That's not true, of course. There were plenty of people 2000 years ago who thought the whole idea of resurrection was nonsense, for pretty much the same reasons some think so today. They didn't need modern science to know that dead people don't rise from the grave. They could tell that just by looking around.

The Christian claim about Easter and the other miracles of Jesus is precisely that they are unusual. People saw and experienced things they hadn't seen or experienced anywhere else. That's one reason they came to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. It's also why science is largely beside the point at Easter, and why many scientists are also people of faith.

Science is about things that happen routinely, especially things that can be verified by experiment. History, on the other hand, is about things that happen only once. History is the story of all the people who ever lived, and even if there are some similarities, every life is unique and everyone's story is different.

It would be strange if someone said, "I only believe things that can be proved scientifically." Really? What about history, the things we know about the past? What about our own memories, and the people in our lives, and the things we know about them? What about friendship and love, music and art – how much of those things do we know through science?

Most of what we believe about the world comes from our own experience and what we learn from other people. And what we believe from others depends on the credibility of the witnesses.

With regard to Easter, and Christianity in general, there are two kinds of witnesses. The first are people who knew Jesus when he walked the earth, and tell the stories we read in the Bible. The second are people who have not seen Jesus but believe in him anyway, because what the New Testament says rings true to their own experience. Some of us here this morning are the second kind of witnesses.

Who are the New Testament witnesses? They begin with Mary Magdalene, who was sick when she first met Jesus. She had seven demons, as Luke puts it, but Jesus made her well. In gratitude Mary follows Jesus the rest of his life – all the way to the cross, where most of the men are too afraid to follow. Jesus comes to those who are grateful, and to those who know suffering, so it's fitting that Mary Magdalene should be the first person in all the world to see the risen Lord.

Then there's Peter. Peter the impulsive one. Peter who first figures out who Jesus is. When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am, he blurts out, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Peter who's quick to make promises he can't quite keep: "Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you," he says. That night he falls asleep in Gethsemane when Jesus needs him to stay awake, and early next morning he denies three times that he ever knew that man on trial, just before the rooster crows. Yet Peter, for all his faults, becomes the rock on which Jesus builds his church. Peter gives us hope because he's so much like us, but Jesus loves him anyway.

There are James and John, the Sons of Thunder, whose mother asks Jesus to give her boys the best seats in heaven – which annoys the other disciples and prompts Jesus to ask whether they can drink the cup he has to drink. Of course they can't, so they become the prototype of Christians who want to skip Good Friday on the

way to Easter, who want the benefits of faith without any of the costs. In the end, they do drink Jesus' cup and become faithful martyrs, which is another word for witnesses.

And then there is Mary, the mother of Jesus. She says yes to God as a teenager, and so becomes the means for God to do great things. She teaches Jesus to walk and talk as a child, and sees him do miracles as a man. Then she sees what no mother should ever see: she watches her son die an agonizing death on a cross. But Mary sees Easter too, and she becomes a witness to the mysterious ways of God, in the best of times and the worst of times.

These are a few of the witnesses who knew Jesus when he walked on earth. They say they're only telling what they saw and heard and experienced themselves. They spend the rest of their lives telling that story, and many of them get beaten and thrown in jail and put to death in ugly ways on account of the story they call "good news."

Why would they do that? Why go to all that trouble if they made the story up? People who, by their own account, were a motley crew, who didn't quite get it while Jesus was alive, and largely disappeared when he was put to death – why did they suddenly become brave and joyful tellers of such a strange tale? Their own answer is: Easter, when they met the risen Lord, and then Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit gave them strength to spread the word to all the world.

So Peter tells the story to Cornelius the centurion, for example. Peter is amazed that God sends him to this Roman, because all the first Christians are Jews, and Jews are not supposed to fraternize with Gentiles. But God shows no partiality; the good news is for everyone. Cornelius never met Jesus, but his prayers lead him to Peter, and Peter leads him to Christ. The Holy Spirit convinces the Roman that the gospel is true, and convinces the Jew that even Gentiles can be saved.

And that's how it's been ever since. One person tells another how God is at work in his life, and the story rings true, even if it sounds strange at first. People are brought together, prayers are answered, and God shows up in subtle but unmistakable ways. After a while, we become witnesses too – witnesses to the grace and power and love of God, and to the way we see God in Jesus Christ.

The life of faith becomes our own experience, and that makes all the difference. We're convinced that behind the trials of this world, there is a God who loves us enough to live and die for us, and that God wants us to love other people the way God loves us. And we believe that death is not the last word. As Jesus lives again this side of Easter, we too can live in love and joy and peace, here and now, and for all eternity.

And so we come to say, as other witnesses have said for nearly 2000 years, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!"