



Sermon

14th April 2024

You are my Witnesses **Luke 24:36-48; Acts 3:12-20**

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If you were a journalist investigating a major world event, how would you go about it? Try this:

“I have investigated all the reports closely and I decided to write an orderly account for you so that you can know beyond a shadow of a doubt the reliability of what you have been taught.”¹

That is how the Message Bible translates the opening verses of Luke’s gospel. So here is what Luke tells us from eye-witness accounts of Jesus’ resurrection:

Luke’s Eye-Witnesses

Early in the morning some of the women followers of Jesus came to the tomb to complete the care of the body. They obviously did not expect to find anything but a dead body. Hear Luke again:

“They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.”²

As they wondered about that, two angels appeared and told them Jesus was alive. The women went to tell the disciples who thought they were speaking nonsense.

Discreditable Witnesses

It is an amazing thing that the gospels record the women being the first witnesses. Why? Because of the culture of the time. In those first century cultures, women were not considered reliable witnesses. Their testimony would not be accepted in a court. If a first century writer were making up a story, he would never have given the first evidence to women or embarrassed himself by giving them any role. The fact that they are included smacks of the truth. They are mentioned because it is what happened. Not because it sounds good – to first century ears it didn’t!

In the same way, if you were making up a story, would you have the lead characters refuse to believe the news when it was presented to them?

Peter wondered and went to look. He saw the linen burial cloths lying apart from the rest of the cloths as they would be in the body had simply passed through them and went away wondering, but not yet believing.

Defeated disciples

A couple of dejected followers, Cleopas and his friend, had given up and left Jerusalem. They had thought Jesus was perhaps the Messiah but ... well it didn’t work out ... he was dead. Except then Jesus joined them on the road unrecognised and explained that the Messiah would have to suffer and then enter his glory. As they were about to eat, their eyes were opened and it dawned on them, that this was Jesus – and he disappeared. They hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the others.

¹ Luke 1:1-4 – (The Message - adapted)

² Luke 24:2-3

Convincing the Incredulous

What followed is the same event we heard described by the Apostle John last week. This is the gathering of the disciples in a locked room when Thomas was missing. Here we have two separate reports of the same event. Different witnesses will emphasise different aspects of the same event but they agree closely with each other.

Luke continues by saying that as they were discussing these strange happenings with the disciples, Jesus appeared in their midst. The poor disciples jumped to the easiest conclusion, it must be a ghost! That is pretty scary! But Jesus showed them his hands and feet and had them touch him to see that he was solid and real. He even used a claim to divinity, "I am." "I am" is at the heart of the divine name, *Yahweh*, "I am that I am." Jesus says, "See my hands and my feet that I am he." The same construction as in "I am the light of the world," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the true vine" etc.

Still they can't believe. Do you pick up the detail: "because of joy and amazement."³ They are overwhelmed. Would you struggle in their place?

About seventeen years ago, Helen and I were praying for a man who had some sort of cyst in his spinal cord. There were two side-effects: one was numbness down the outside of his left forearm and in his third and fourth fingers on that hand. The other was a large swelling over his left collar bone. We prayed for feeling to come back into the numb areas of his left arm. At one point, I touched his middle finger and commanded feeling to return as I ran my finger along it. He jumped and said, "That tickled."

I said, "But you can't feel in that finger."

He replied, "I can now." A few moments later, he could feel in both those fingers. When we prayed about the lump, he pulled aside the collar of his shirt to show it to us. It was about 8cm across and 1 cm high. We prayed for it to go. Then he pulled open the collar again and it was gone! There was normal skin with the underlying bones showing as usual. My mind reeled. My first thought was, "It must have been on the other side." But it hadn't been and there was no lump on either side. He laughed at me and said, "You didn't really believe did you!" The answer was yes and no. I did believe that God could deal with the lump but I hadn't expected it to go instantly. Perhaps I had thought it would happen overnight.

This is a very minor example compared with the experience of the disciples but it does illustrate the principle that it is initially hard for us to accept something outside our experience; that is why we have a cliché, "I don't believe it!" How much more the disciples' minds must have reeled at the evidence of their eyes and ears. The dead man was alive, calmly talking, even telling them off for being troubled and arguing in their hearts. To convince them that he was not a ghost, he asked for food and ate some fish in front of them.

Once he settled their doubts, he taught them again, showing how it was necessary for him to suffer, to die and to rise again and for repentance and forgiveness to be preached to all nations. Then he said, "You are witnesses to these things."⁴

The witness programme

They had indeed been witnesses of his teaching, his miracles, his death and now his resurrection. And they were to tell of what they have seen - that is the essence of being a witness.

And that is what we hear in the passage from Acts. Peter was speaking straight after the healing of the crippled beggar. A crowd had come together amazed that this well-known cripple can now jump and walk and Peter explained what has happened. The crowd were witnesses but they needed explanation to understand the event. Peter was a witness of a much more important event. Do you notice that he goes quickly into witness

³ Luke 24:41

⁴ Luke 24:48

mode? He pointed them towards Jesus. “Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? ¹³ The God of ... our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus...”⁵

Then he pointed to the innocence, death and resurrection of Jesus:

You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.⁶

They had the confirming proof that the cripple is healed. God hears when this name, Jesus, is used, when there is belief in him.

Again Peter picked up the agenda Jesus laid out for him: It had been prophesied in the scriptures, the Christ would suffer. Repentance and forgiveness are to be preached to all nations. And so he called them to change their minds, be forgiven and receive Christ.

It was not just this occasion, Peter stuck to this pattern. Hear him now:

- Preaching on the day of Pentecost: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.”⁷
- Speaking to the Sanhedrin: “We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”⁸
- Preaching to the Gentiles at Cornelius’ house: “We are witnesses ...[that] they killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.”⁹

Luke has taken us through that resurrection day: he gave us the accounts of the women and Peter finding the empty tomb, the angels told the women what had happened, Peter met Jesus, the two disciples met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, there was the meeting with the eleven apostles and some other disciples that evening. They were to be witnesses of what they had seen, ie., they were simply to tell the truth about their experiences.

All Christians to be witnesses

All Christians are called to do that. Not necessarily to be skilled evangelists but to say, “I have witnessed this. I have had this experience of God.”

This makes it all possible – not so scary. We just have to tell what we have seen and what has happened to us. But perhaps you are thinking “It’s alright for him, he is a special person, a professional, a priest.” No, Peter said in Acts 5:32:

We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

The Holy Spirit is a witness too

It is not just we who are to be witnesses but the Holy Spirit is as well. He is sent to us, to help us.

1. The Holy Spirit witnesses to us by giving us the conviction of the truth. Facts and explanations will take you much of the way to belief, but there is always an extra step of trust. When you decide to believe, it is the Holy Spirit who adds that confident trust in the fact of the resurrection.

⁵ Acts 3:12-13

⁶ Acts 3:15

⁷ Acts 2:32

⁸ Acts 5:32

⁹ Acts 10:39&40

2. The Holy Spirit also helps us to witness to others. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would be given after he had ascended and that they would be given power and would be his witnesses.¹⁰ And when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, he helps us to be witnesses of our own experience of Jesus. Isn't God good? He doesn't leave us to do it all alone; he gives us the Holy Spirit to help us. In consequence, we need to be ready to tell others about Jesus - especially of our own experiences of him. Jesus is alive now and he wants to be at work in and through us.

What's your current testimony?

I wonder what your most recent testimony is. Are you ready to let Jesus show you the way forward in some tricky situation? This is an opportunity to allow him in, to change things and then you will have something to say about what Jesus has done in your life.

We all need fresh testimonies of God to give to our neighbours, our work colleagues, our friends. Why not pray with someone you trust and invite the Holy Spirit to witness in you and through you to the truth of the resurrection. What about expecting God to give you fresh stories of his action in your life to encourage you and others that God is alive and active!

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¹⁰ Acts 1:8