

## Credible Witnesses

[Matthew 28:1-10]

Witnesses! The whole theme of this post-Easter series of messages is the Christian's calling to bear witness to our faith. And most of us are terrified by the very thought. I was called on once to be a witness at court in a rape trial. I was not a witness to the rape, but the man who was changed his story when he realized the threat to his own well-being. Then, stricken in his conscience, he came to me for counsel on what to do. "Well," I told him, "of course you have to tell the truth, but there are things we can do to help and support you." Since he was the key to the prosecution's case, they called me to be a character witness for him. They wanted to know if they could trust him after changing his story. I can clearly remember how my mouth went completely dry in the crowded courtroom. I was sitting on the edge of my seat at the center of things, straining forward to speak into the microphone. Finally the judge said to me, "Relax; take a deep breath; sit back and pull the microphone toward you. We need to hear what you say."

Our society today is flooded with accusations and legal disputes. Perhaps the most difficult and yet most important thing is for us to be able to discern, "Who's telling the truth?" My character witness was one step in this process. The court had to determine whether he was a credible witness. Which takes us to the enormous significance of our calling to share the truth of the gospel. The resurrection story, if it is true, changes absolutely EVERYTHING! Everything we hope for, everything we believe, indeed, our ongoing battle with death and our eternal destiny depend on it! We weren't there. We didn't see it. Our Christian faith depends entirely on the credibility of the original witnesses. The tension in the courtroom should absolutely be palpable. Can we trust the story the witnesses have left us?

But if we are entirely honest, when we begin to examine it, our witnesses are not all that impressive. Think about it: 1) There is the incredible nature of the claims. Generally we can look at a situation and say, "Well, that's possible." But not here. Someone coming back to life from the dead? That's incredible. That's just not possible. How gullible do you think I am? 2) The self-serving nature of the claims. The disciples were accused of making up a story which would help promote their little religious revolution, challenging the establishment and the powers that be. And once these doubts began to surface, a closer look began to find inconsistencies and holes in their story. 3) There were discrepancies in the witnesses stories. (Who was there? When did they arrive? What did they actually see?) 4) All the primary witnesses were women. (Who the culture completely disrespected.) 5) Nearly all the witnesses expressed doubts and uncertainty. And finally, and most importantly: 6) Nobody actually saw the resurrection take place! (There was only hearsay evidence that it actually happened.)

What I want to show you this morning, surprisingly, is that these are the very things which establish the credibility of the witnesses beyond reasonable doubt. You know the story, but let's take a quick look at it. By the way, I love God's timing here. It is at dawn (my favorite time of day) when everything is fresh and new and overflowing with possibility. The darkness is past. And it's the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath. The Sabbath, or 7<sup>th</sup> day, was the climax of creation. But now, with the resurrection, something wholly new is dawning.

So Mary Magdalene and a few others, (each gospel has a different list, but she's on all of them), come to the tomb to care for the body of Jesus. In other words, they accept the fact that he is dead. They were not expecting a resurrection. It's all women, by the way. They had been at the cross, witnessed his burial, and now are here to grieve and care for his body. Where was the Palm Sunday crowd of admirers? Or more to the point, where were all those important disciples? No, just the women. Too risky, apparently, for everyone else. (I'd like a witness that was *there*, at least.)

And what did they see? Well, they expected to see the guards, and the sealed tomb. That was a dilemma. How could they tend to the body? Maybe the soldiers would be sympathetic and helpful. But in fact they feel the earth tremble, and arrive on a scene of some chaos. The stone has already been rolled away, the guards have panicked, and there is somebody there – somebody tremendously impressive, like an angel, who tells them, (v.5), "Don't you be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. (True, he had told them, but it didn't make any sense.) Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

Now I want you to start looking at this account as a skeptic who thinks the story is entirely made-up. Let's be honest. First of all, it is, as we have admitted, an outlandish tale. So who would even try to convince anyone of its truth? Well, the only reason to even try would be because you believed it actually happened. And if you believed it really happened, something so amazing as this must be shared, however reluctant we may be. I remember when I was a kid, I had a relative who had a major problem with alcohol. One day when he was out on his farm in South Dakota, he saw a kangaroo hopping across the field. It had escaped from a zoo, but he did not know that. And there was no way he was going to tell anyone what he had seen. They would all assume he was "under the influence." Who would tell a story about a resurrection? Everyone would assume you were crazy. So a witness who would risk his or her reputation to tell you something they know will sound ridiculous to you, must be thoroughly convinced it is true!

And the second objection, about the story being self-serving for the disciples, in what way? All they did was increase exponentially the risk of being put to death themselves – as nearly all of them eventually were. It was not in their best interests to tell this story, yet they did it. Why? Because they were absolutely convinced it had actually happened. When the story puts you at risk, as it did for my friend in the rape trial, why would you even tell it? The fact that you do anyway makes your story far more credible.

And what about the discrepancies in the witnesses stories? Don't the differences cast doubt on their credibility? Who was there, when, and under what circumstances? It's different in each of the four gospels. But on second thought, have you ever listened to even two, let alone a dozen, witnesses to any accident or event? Do their stories match exactly? No, they've noticed different things. Their stories always vary, sometimes even contradict. So if you have several witnesses in a legal trial who tell exactly the same story, you assume there has been collusion. They are probably covering something up. They are less believable than those whose stories vary because they noticed or remembered different things. The variable witnesses are more credible. They're trying to tell the truth. They didn't make up their story ahead of time. It's the same with discrepancies in the four gospel accounts. "I don't know about *that*. I just know what I saw."

And what about the fact that all the first witnesses were women? If the disciples were making up the story of the resurrection, they would absolutely never have all the witnesses be women. A first-century law court would not accept the testimony of a woman. In that culture they were not highly educated, they were not respected, they were considered a man's property. Their testimony would simply be rejected out-of-hand. The only reason the disciples would admit that only the women saw this, had to be because that's what happened and they were trying to tell the truth. It was an inconvenient truth, and it increases the credibility of their story of the resurrection.

And then all the doubts that everybody admits. All across the gospel story the witnesses confess that they doubted whether this had really happened. Even when they saw him a bit later, first of all right there in Jerusalem, and later in Galilee, they admit that some doubted it was really him. That used to really bother me. I mean, why admit your doubts if you are trying to convince someone of something? But again, the only reason you would is if that was true and you were trying to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And of course they doubted it! Imagine if we were out front chatting after church, and I stepped off the curb and was run over by a bus. You all saw it happen. You saw my crushed skull. You heard the report of the medics. But a few days later you saw me down in the junction, looking perfectly healthy. Would you say, "Well, look at that! Paul must have risen from the dead!" Or would you say, "My word, that man looks an awful lot like Paul, but of course it can't be him. We know he's dead. What a coincidence! I wonder if he had a twin brother?" You see, admitting their doubts once again makes their story far more credible. They didn't make this story up. They are trying to tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may. You can believe them or not.

But the final objection, the one thing that would likely discredit their story entirely, was the fact that no one actually saw the resurrection take place. This seems to be the fatal flaw in their story. Yet for me, this astonishing omission establishes the witnesses credibility more than any other single fact. If they were making this story up, there is absolutely no way they would have left out an account of the resurrection itself. That was the whole point of the story! And you're telling me no one actually saw it happen? I mean, imagine the conversation. "Wow! A resurrection? Really? Who saw it? What happened?" If you want to be convincing, you don't say, "Well, no one actually saw it,

really.” You say, “Oh man, it was awesome! There was this spectacular flash of light, and we heard the voice of God, and the rock just split open, and we watched in amazement as Jesus just rose up like a Great Spirit through the graveclothes.” I mean, if you’re making this up, which option do you choose? But if you are committed to telling the truth, regardless of the consequences, then you admit no one saw it. “I sure wish I had been there.”

Later, more doubtful advocates, attempted to correct this apparent oversight by the original witnesses. An apocryphal book called *Gospel of Peter* gives this account: “(Then) there rang out a loud voice from heaven, and they saw the heavens opened and two men come down from [the heavens] in a great brightness and draw nigh to the sepulchre. That stone which had been laid against the entrance to the sepulchre started of itself to roll and gave way to the side, and the sepulchre was opened, and both the young men entered in. (And the soldiers saw) three men come out from the sepulchre, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them, and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was led of them by the hand overpassing the heavens.”

Isn’t that more impressive than, “Uh, well, we noticed the tomb was empty!” Ironically, it was the apostle Peter, in his second letter, who had this to say: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

Most of us long for the extraordinary. We would love to see some spectacular miracles. But in reality, most of what God does is pretty ordinary. He just makes it work to accomplish his purposes. Oh, the “miracles” are there. We are just too “used to” them. “Existence,” for example! How did that come about? The life that animates the dust of the earth. The perfect arrangement of everything in the universe to support human life. Rationality. The miracle of the sun empowering all life – plants storing it, bodies converting it to fuel life. Is it really so unbelievable that what God has done in bringing this all about is repeated at death for those he is gathering into his kingdom? Oh, if you look, you’ll see that miracles abound in our world.

But let me come back to my assignment, which was to see what we could learn from the women who were the first witnesses to the resurrection. They show up at the tomb. The disciples could not bear witness to any of these things. They weren’t there! You need to be present and paying attention. You don’t have to know everything. You don’t have to be highly educated. You don’t need a degree in theology. You don’t even need to know what’s going on – what it all means. You just need to show up, and then tell what you’ve seen and heard. That’s what Jesus’ disciple John said in the scripture printed in your bulletins. “That which . . . we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.”

And that’s all the angel told the women to do. “Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’” Here’s what we saw, and here’s how you can verify it. Does it make sense? The disciples didn’t think so at first. Well, ok, check it out. If you don’t believe us, you can see him for yourselves.

So that's what they did. "The women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples." Bible scholar Dale Bruner was discussing this passage with a group of Presbyterian pastors at a conference, and commented on the unexpected juxtaposition of "fear and joy." One young pastor spoke up and said, "Fear and joy *can* coexist; I know, I just got married." Witnessing can certainly be equal parts fear and joy.

And here is something tremendously significant that many Christians miss. No one is asked to "*just believe*." You are invited to ask questions, express doubts, look at the evidence yourself. You might remember the Berean Christians in the book of Acts who, in a time of doubt and even hostile resistance to the gospel – not unlike our own day – were invited to consider it closely, examine the evidence, and see if they were convinced what the apostle Paul told them was true.

A witness doesn't need to prove anything. Just tell your experience and let your hearers decide what they want to do with it. My favorite witness in the whole Bible is the man born blind in John 9, whom Jesus heals. The Pharisees got their phylacteries all knotted up and started cross-examining him. Who did this? How did he do it? What authority did he have to do it? The formerly blind man finally had enough. I thought *you* would know all that, he said. What I know is this: Once I was blind, now I can see. That's what a Christian witness does. I don't know how the atonement works. What I know is trusting Jesus Christ is making a huge difference in my life.

There is one more cool little episode in Matthew's account of the women's experience here. Hurrying on their way, equal parts joyful and terrified, they suddenly meet Jesus. And I love this. Jesus says, "Hi!" He doesn't say, "Don't be afraid," or "Peace be with you," or "All hail", He says, "Hey, how's it going?" Seriously! This is even today what you would say in Greek when you bump into someone on the street. It's just a generic greeting.

And I think Jesus was just trying to put them at ease. I mean, after all, he's literally just been to hell and back, but he's saying, "Hey, lighten up. I've got this. Don't worry." You understand, what's just happened is indeed awesome, world-changing in fact. But it's not intended for super-sacred temples or ultra-pious saints. This is for everyday conversation with neighbors and friends. Don't make it hard for yourselves. You've had some experience with your Christian faith; tell somebody about it. That's all. That's what a witness does.

You may be an unexpected witness. You may not have a PhD. in New Testament like your current pastor. People may doubt you because you've never really studied the Bible, or you don't have much of a reputation as a Christian, or no experience with debate or public speaking, or you're too young, or too old, or (heaven forbid) the wrong gender. It doesn't matter. In fact your witness will likely be more credible because it is unexpected. Pastors and theologians are professionals. They're trained and they get paid to do these sorts of things. But you . . . who are you? "Nobody, really. I'm just telling you what happened to me when I met God." Like the women, you're the best kind of witness there is. Because you have no ulterior motive, nothing to gain by it. You don't have to be clever or brilliant. You are a credible witness because you are just trying to tell the truth about your own experience. Relax! Take a deep breath. It's not that hard.