

Resurrection Witnesses

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11

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This morning I would like for us to conclude our series of lessons on favorite scenes from the life of Jesus Christ. Hopefully all of those lessons will be posted on our website sometime later this week, but this morning, I would like for us to go back to a question from another one of the young women of this congregation, a question that I have never really considered. One of our young women wants to know, “When Jesus came back from the dead, why did he not appear to everybody in the entire world?” When we let that sink in a little bit, we realize that we have some brilliant children here! Those of you who teach the Bible classes downstairs know this. We have some kids here who are constantly thinking. And again, this is something I have never considered, but it is a great question! When he came back from the dead, why did Jesus not appear to the entire world?

As we think about this question, I want us to go to a passage that is actually not in the four gospel accounts. Instead, the passage is found in 1 Corinthians 15 (p. 1800). You might be thinking, “Why do we need to go to one of Paul’s letters to learn about the resurrection?” But what we need to realize is that 1 Corinthians was most likely actually written several years before most of the gospel accounts. Matthew was most likely written at some point just before 70 AD, Mark was most likely written in the mid-50’s AD, Luke was most likely written 60 AD, and John was most likely written even later, at some point around 85 AD or even later. So, with the possible exception of Mark, 1 Corinthians was one of the first inspired books to actually deal directly with the Lord’s resurrection, having been written by the apostle Paul in roughly 55 AD, only about 25 years after the events that are recorded.

This morning, then, as we try to answer the question from one of the young women here, I want us to look together at one of the earliest written records of the Lord’s resurrection as Paul writes an inspired letter to a church he helped establish several years earlier. As a new congregation, they apparently had some questions about the resurrection, just as we also do today, so let us notice, please – 1 Corinthians 15:1-11,

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and

that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

As we try to answer our question, I want us to go back and review what the gospel actually is, I want us to notice the proof that is given here in this passage at least, and then I want us to close by looking at the “So what?” question: What does this passage really mean for us?

I. **But first of all, let us make sure we understand WHAT THE GOSPEL REALLY IS.**

And thankfully, Paul defines it in the first four verses. We know from looking it up in a Greek dictionary that the word “***gospel***” literally means “***good news***.” In verse 1, we find that this “***gospel***” or “***good news***” was preached in Corinth, we find that this “***gospel***” or “***good news***” was “***received***,” we find that the “***gospel***” or “***good news***” is something in which they currently “***stand***,” we find that the “***gospel***” or “***good news***” is of “***first importance***.” But we want to know: What is the good news? And Paul tells us in verses 3-4.

First of all, the good news is that “***Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.***” In other words, his death was not an accident, but it was planned, it was prophesied, it had been predicted from the beginning of time. We think of that prophecy back in Genesis 3:15. That prophecy looked forward to the Lord’s death by crucifixion. Later on, we read in Exodus 12 about the Passover lamb that was to be sacrificed for the sins of the people, and we find there some amazing foreshadowing – the Lamb was to be perfect and not a bone was to be broken. We find that fulfilled in the death of Jesus on the cross in John 19:36. In Psalm 22, we have a long list of prophecies that were fulfilled in the Lord’s crucifixion – he would be pierced in his hands and feet, the soldiers would gamble for his clothing, and so on. We have another very detailed prophecy in Isaiah 53. But the point is, Jesus died “***according to the Scriptures.***” His death was not an accident, but it was planned for a reason. He died “***for our sins***,” as Paul says in verse 3.

The cross, therefore, means everything to us. I know we do not want to make the cross itself an idol. However, let us never go to the other extreme. Instead, let us remember what Paul said in Galatians 6:14, “***But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.***” Paul, there, was not talking about the wood itself, but he was talking about the Lord’s death, and so today, when we sing about the cross, we are also singing not about the wood itself, but we are singing about the Lord’s death, the Lord’s sacrifice. Let us, like Paul, boast in the cross. The Lord’s death is a crucial part of the good news. The word “***crucial***,” by the way, refers to the cross. Even our English language reflects the fact that the cross means everything. Truly, as Isaiah prophesied, “***He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed***” (Isaiah 53:5).

Secondly, Paul very specifically identifies the gospel message as including the Lord’s burial. Sometimes we might be tempted to overlook the importance of the burial. And yet, as with the Lord’s death, the burial itself was also predicted by the Old Testament Scriptures. We think of that passage in Isaiah 53:9 where Isaiah said, “***His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death.***” So, having been killed by crucifixion, Jesus should have been buried with the wicked, yet that is not what happened. Instead, he was

with a rich man in his death. As I understand it, that is a reference to being buried in a rich man's tomb, which is exactly what happened. As Charles Hodge has said, "To save us, God could not cancel the cross, but He could be lavish in the burial," and that is exactly what happened. Jesus was wrapped in a linen cloth with a hundred pounds of myrrh and spices. He died like a common criminal, but he was buried as a king. Not only that, but we think about Jonah spending 3 days in the belly of a great fish and how the Lord applied that Scripture to his own burial. We think of how Jesus compared his own death to the planting of a grain of wheat, **"...unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit,"** a reference to his burial. We think of King David predicting that the Messiah's soul would not be abandoned to Hades (the place of the dead), and that his body would not undergo decay (Psalm 16:10). This was a reference to his burial, in a Scripture quoted by Peter in Acts 2:27. Jesus was buried, but his body was not left there to rot. Instead, the burial served as proof of his death. Several years ago, I asked the question: What if Jesus died on the cross and then came back to life 5 minutes later? Obviously, people would say that he never died. As it happened, though, the soldiers determined he was dead, they confirmed his death with a spear, the Lord was taken down and buried, and the Jewish leaders insisted that Pilate seal the tomb and guard it to avoid any rumors. So, Jesus didn't just die and immediately come back to life, but he was buried, and then the tomb was sealed and guarded to make sure he stayed buried! The burial, therefore, is a critical part of the gospel message.

As we go back to 1 Corinthians 15, we see the third part of the good news as Paul also says in verse 4 that, **"...He was raised on the third day [also] according to the Scriptures."** And that, of course, is why we are here this morning. This is why we come together on the first day of every week. And as with the Lord's death and burial, it impossible to overstate the importance of the resurrection. As Paul will go on to write in verse 17, **"...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins."**

II. And that is what leads us into the next section here, as Paul gives proof of the resurrection, and the proof he gives comes in the form of EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY.

Several years ago, we looked at the resurrection in terms of proof from history. We looked at the resurrection in terms of logic – since the tomb was empty, who had motive to steal the body? And logically, when we examine all of the possibilities, we find that no one would have had any motive to steal the body, and we know that volumes have been written on this. So, there are some good logical reasons to believe in the resurrection. And there are a number of ways (like this) we could approach this question. But I find it interesting that in one of the first New Testament passages to be written about the resurrection, Paul does not appeal to logic or secular written history, but he appeals to the testimony of eyewitnesses.

One author referred to the resurrection and pointed out that if we were holding a trial to determine the facts relating to the resurrection, and if we were to call to the witness stand every witness who personally encountered the risen Christ, if we cross-examined them for only 15 minutes each, and if we went around the clock with no break, we would be listening to first-hand testimony for more than 128 hours – that is over five days worth of testimony!

Paul starts with Cephas (or Peter). Peter, of course, is the one who denied the Lord during the trial. So, it is interesting that Paul starts with testimony from a denier. In verse 4, Paul also refers to the fact that Jesus appeared to **"the twelve,"** a reference to the rest of the apostles, a group of men who had also abandoned the Lord on the night before his death. In verse 6, Paul refers to the fact that Jesus appeared **"to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now."** You might remember that right after his resurrection, Jesus told several people to go meet him in Galilee and to pass it on, that others should meet

him there as well. We assume that this is the meeting with the **“more than 500.”** And with this, Paul was basically issuing a challenge. He was saying, “If you don’t believe me, then go out there and start looking into this on your own.” For those who say that the resurrection was merely a hallucination, one psychiatrist has said that having 500 people hallucinate the same thing would be a greater miracle than the resurrection itself! And so Paul was issuing a challenge: Go talk to these people!

Again, this letter is being written only 25 years after the resurrection takes place. As I was preparing today’s lesson, I tried to think back to what was going on in the world 25 years ago, that would be back in 1989. What were you doing in 1989? In April 1989, I was a junior in high school. As far as the news goes, in April of 1989 is when the protests started in Tiananmen Square. I would say that most of us here this morning probably remember that. We remember the student standing there in front of the long line of tanks. And if we were truly interested, I would imagine that there is probably some way for us to come in contact with at least some of those who were there. Even with the Chinese government clamping down on that, I would imagine that we could still interview at least several who were there. And that is what Paul was saying about the resurrection: If you doubt what I am saying, then go talk to those who were there.

In verse 7, Paul refers to James. We assume this is the Lord’s half brother. When he lived, his brothers and sisters did not believe, and who can blame them. If my own sister called me this afternoon and told me she was God, I would be the harshest critic! But after the resurrection, at least some of the Lord’s siblings (including James) had a change of heart. In fact, in the book of James, James refers to his half brother as the **“Lord of Glory.”** Only the resurrection could make you say something like that about your own brother! At the end of verse 7, Paul says that Jesus appeared to **“all the apostles.”** This would include Thomas, the apostle who demanded the opportunity to touch the holes in the Lord’s hands. This would include the group as they gathered together one last time as Jesus ascended into heaven right there in front of their very eyes, an event recorded for us in Luke 24 and Acts 1.

We look at this passage, then, and we see that our belief in the resurrection is based on eyewitness testimony. How do we know what these people saw? Well, several of them wrote books. We think of Matthew the tax collector, an educated man very acquainted with evidence and testimony (think about an IRS agent today). Matthew wrote a book. We think of Mark, a young man at the time, a friend of the apostle Peter, Mark also wrote a book. John, one of the Lord’s closest friends, also wrote a book. Several of the eyewitnesses were interviewed by men like Luke who wrote his account shortly after the fact. We think of the opening verses of the book of Luke, **“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”** We think of the opening words of the book of Acts (also written by Luke), **“The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.”** Luke’s books, then, were based on eyewitness testimony.

And I would point out: These eyewitnesses were willing to die for their faith. Large numbers of men and women were willing to be tortured for their belief in the resurrection. What motive could they have had to make this up and then suffer and die in the most horrible of ways? People today lie for profit, or to build up their reputation, or to gain political power, or for some other advantage. The early Christians, though, had no

motive to lie. People sometimes lie to save themselves, but these people told the truth, knowing that they would suffer for it. They stuck by their story, knowing that it would cost them everything.

III. **As we come near the end of this passage, we get to the “SO WHAT?” section as we find how Paul applies this to himself (and ultimately to us as well).**

In verse 8, we find that Jesus appeared to Paul also, and in the next few verses, we find Paul praising God for making him what he is, and he is a preacher of the gospel. And in that last verse (verse 11), Paul says, **“Whether then it was I or they** [referring to the other witnesses], **so we preach and so you believed.”** In other words, it is not important who taught you the gospel message, but what is important is that you heard it and believed it.

And that, I believe, is where we get back to the question from one of the young women here: Why did Jesus not appear to everybody? As I see it, the answer is: Because if he appeared to everybody, there would have been no need to preach the gospel. If Jesus had appeared to everybody on the earth at that time, there would have been no message for the early Christians to pass along, there would have been no audience. As I see it, then, we have in this passage a reminder about how important it is that we preach the gospel with no addition or subtraction. Do you remember what Paul said in those opening verses? **“Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel...”** (in verse 1), and **“...I delivered to you...”** (in verse 3). This was not a message Paul invented. This is not something Paul was making up. Instead, the gospel is something Paul was delivering. The gospel was something that Paul was making known. We think of the postal workers who deliver our mail. Their job is not to open up our mail and make little changes here and there, their job is not to open up my bank statement and start changing the numbers; instead, their job is to deliver it. Their job is to get it from there to here. And that is Paul’s job as a preacher, to deliver the gospel, to preach it faithfully, with no additions or subtractions.

And that is what Paul did. He traveled all over the Mediterranean world preaching the gospel. He would go to a town like Corinth, full of all kinds of immorality, he would preach the Lord’s death, burial, and resurrection, people would respond to the message, and the Lord’s church would be established. And slowly, one by one, lives were changed. One person would tell another, and the church would grow stronger over time. God’s kingdom would grow.

But again: Why didn’t everybody get to see the Lord after his resurrection? I would invite you to turn over very quickly to one more passage in Acts 10:39-42 (p. 1720). In this passage, Peter is preaching the gospel to Cornelius and his family, the first gentiles to obey the good news, and in this passage, notice, please, what Peter says about Jesus – Acts 10:39-42,

We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.

Notice: Peter’s message is the same as Paul’s message. Jesus was put to death on the cross, but he was lifted up on the third day, and the purpose of having witnesses was so that those witnesses would go out and faithfully preach that message, **“...He ordered us to preach to the people.”**

So what? What does this mean to us? It means that we personally are the mail carriers. It means that as Christians we are personally responsible for passing along the gospel message. Have we delivered that message to somebody lately?

Conclusion:

The gospel is the good news that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, he was buried, and he was resurrected from the dead on the first day of the week. In 2 Thessalonians 1:8, Paul warns about how important it is that we **“obey the gospel.”** As Silas read for us earlier from Romans 6, we obey the gospel by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. Just as Christ died, we die to sin, and we are then buried with him in his death. At that point, our sins are forgiven, and we are raised up out of the water to live the Christian life.

- No wonder Jesus said, **“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved...”** (Mark 16:16).
- No wonder over 3000 people obeyed the gospel on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 as they were immersed in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:38).
- No wonder the Ethiopian officer heard a sermon on Jesus and pulled over to the side of the road asking the preacher, **“Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”** (Acts 8:36).
- No wonder Paul heard the gospel and was told by Ananias, **“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name”** (Acts 22:16).
- No wonder the Philippian jailer took Paul and Silas **“...that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately...was baptized, he and all his household”** (Acts 16:33).
- No wonder the apostle Peter went on to write in 1 Peter 3:21, **“Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”**

The good news must be obeyed, and we obey the good news by turning away from sin, by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and by being raised up out of the water to live the Christian life. If there is no burial, there will be no resurrection. So, in answer to the question from one of the young women here this morning: Jesus did not appear to everybody after his resurrection, because that is our job. Our job is to tell people. And yet at the same time, I would also point out: There is a day coming when all who have ever lived will see Jesus. Paul tells us about it in Philippians 2, but at that time it will be too late. By that time, for those who have not obeyed the gospel in this life, it will not be voluntary. The scriptures tell us that on that day, every knee will bow.

Because that day is coming, we would invite all here this morning to obey the gospel. If you have any questions about the Christian faith, we would encourage you to ask. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, we would love to help you with that. We have a baptistery downstairs that we can fill up with warm water in about 25 minutes. If you are ready to make that decision, if you are ready to be buried with Christ in baptism so that you can be raised up forgiven, we hope you will let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com