

# WITNESSES FOR THE DEFENSE

By Steve Zeisler

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One of the most poignant and arresting dramas in Scripture is the account of Mary Magdalene's grief and dismay upon discovering that the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb on the first Easter morning.

Mary's life had been utterly changed by Jesus. He understood and forgave her, showing her the way to the Living God himself. She approached his tomb, seeking to anoint his dead body, the last remaining trace of her relationship with the Messiah. She anticipated seeing his lifeless face, a countenance that had once smiled upon her and uplifted her. On seeing the empty tomb, she cried out three different times, first, to Peter and John, then to two men sitting in the very tomb, and finally to a man she supposed was a gardener, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

In these words Mary articulated a cry that has been expressed by humanity throughout history, one that has been uttered by those with some knowledge of God's existence; by those who still retain a childhood memory of a Christian hymn; by those who feel that, even though God might be knowable, it's too late for them: "They have taken away my Lord." I cannot find the answer to the sickness of heart which I feel."

## INSISTENCE ON THE RESURRECTION

The resurrection, of course, was the triumphant answer to Mary's forlorn cry. Jesus had not been taken, but rather had been resurrected. He at last stood before her, raised in triumph, and called to her. Our Lord was still radically connected to humanity; the link between God and man, which began in the incarnation, would never be broken because he had been raised. Thus, the answer to the plaintive cry, "Where have they taken him?" is, he has not been taken away; he is still here with us. He even spoke Mary's name, confirming that he knew her and had not forgotten her, even in his resurrected state. The resurrection answered the threat that in the crucifixion, Jesus was forever lost to the human race. The resurrection proves that nothing can ever separate us from him.

First Corinthians 15, the passage to which we now come in our studies in Paul's letter, is the classic text in any discussion of the resurrection of Jesus. It was written to contradict an insidious teaching that had been allowed to spread in the Corinthian church. That teaching is noted in verses 12 and 13.

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised;

If the resurrection is not true, then Mary's desperate cry must forever remain unanswered. If Jesus has not been raised, then he in fact was taken away someplace and his body has long since decayed. But if this scenario is true, then God cannot be known. His final word, his attempt to communicate with man has failed.

Some in Corinth were teaching that human beings are not raised at all. (Next week we will talk about the possible alternatives these teachers were suggesting.) The danger which this teaching raises, of course, is that if the reality of human resurrection is undermined, then Jesus' resurrection is denied and we lose Jesus Christ himself. "...if Christ has not been raised," says Paul, "your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (v.17). The resurrection of Jesus is the Christian's assurance that our Lord is committed to us; that his work on the cross was approved by God, and that work will never lose its efficacy. But some in Corinth were attacking this truth.

As we have already seen in this series of messages in First Corinthians, Paul has had to bring his apostolic wisdom to bear on a number of issues which this adolescent church was wrestling with. Here in chapter 15, however, the issue which he is addressing goes way beyond the everyday scruples of ordinary church life: in this instance the threat was to the very gospel itself.

Let us begin by reading the passage:

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 it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

For I am the least of the apostles, who am 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. Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection from the dead?

This chapter is a comprehensive study into the nature of life and death, the triumph of life and the certainty of resurrection. The question which we will discuss this morning is, can we be certain that Jesus was in fact resurrected from the dead? Is there reliable evidence for the resurrection? Next week we will discuss the implications of the resurrection. Then we will consider the question, how are the dead raised? (v.35). Lastly, we will look at the hymn which glories in the truth of the resurrection.

## **THE ESSENTIAL FACTS**

What, then, are the facts concerning the resurrection? Newspaper reporters learn early in school to get the news fast; to get it right; and to spell all names correctly. It is not the job of reporters to comment on the news but rather to get the bare facts right to begin with. The report should be simple and clear, and have a sense of urgency about it. The important facts should be written in such a way that readers may quickly grasp the essential elements of the story and not wander about the page, searching for what should be immediately apparent. Paul has certainly accomplished this in these opening verses. He writes clearly and urgently about the resurrection. The facts which he mentions are foundational to everything in the Christian faith.

That the world attacks these truths should come as no surprise to us. When Hollywood produces an offensive interpretation of the life of Christ, we should not be aghast or incredulous. Neither should we be surprised that the academic world should find unbelievable the eyewitness accounts of the early church; and seek to throw out most of Scripture as the writing of ordinary men who wrote exaggerations, or fiction.

What is much more dangerous, however, is that the church should lose its way concerning the resurrection; that some within the church should begin teaching what was being taught in Corinth. This is what we must safeguard against today. Many who ought to know better have lost sight of the simple facts, the radical nature, the historical certainty upon which the Christian faith rests. This is why Paul's clear and simple statement of the facts of the resurrection is relevant to us today, just as it was relevant to the Corinthians 2,000 years ago.

## **URGENCY AND SIMPLICITY**

If you read between the lines of this passage, you will soon detect the urgency in Paul's voice as he dictates these verses. The RSV and the NIV render the opening words, "I remind you, brethren..." But this is not accurate. His actual words were, "I make known to you, brethren..." This is no mere reminder of something that the Corinthians had laid aside. Rather, the idea is, "I must preach this to you again, this message that you have received, in which you stand, by which you are being saved. You have already agreed to this, but I need to teach it to you again."

There is a sense of urgent importance about Paul's words. This is a message of "first importance" (v.3). He even raises the terrible possibility that the faith of some of them might have been in vain. Some needed to hear the message again because there was a possibility that they had never believed the message at all. This is an urgent message, a message of "first importance."

But it is also a message that is simple: "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." Christ died. This simple statement would forever change things. Some in the first century, and some today, too, deny that Christ died. They even deny that he was human, saying that he only appeared to be so; that he was a mere idea, and that what matters is how we feel about the idea of a Christ figure. We must insist, however, that Jesus was a real person, that the blood, thirst, loneliness and anguish of the cross cost him his life. Christ died. We must insist on this.

Furthermore, "Christ died for our sins." His was not an accidental death. He did not die because he became caught up in a movement that entrapped him. He came to die. "I lay down my life," he said once, "no one takes it from me." Christ was the innocent Lamb of God who took upon himself our sins so that we need never face them again. He died for the things that we recognize are an offense to God, to humanity and to ourselves. And he was buried. There was no doubt that he was dead. But then he was raised again. God accepted the work which Christ had done on the cross because he raised him from the dead and glorified him. The sin-bearing work of Jesus was thus declared to be acceptable to God.

All of this, we are told, is, "according to the Scriptures." From the beginning, the Scriptures anticipate the cross. Eve was told that one day she would have a descendant who would crush the head of the serpent and suffer in doing so. The sacrificial system of the Jewish temple bore testimony of the ultimate sin-bearer, as does the witness of the prophets. God had planned all of this from the beginning. The truth which he had received, the life-giving news of what Christ had accomplished in his sacrifice and resurrection, says Paul, was what he passed on to the Corinthians, and they in turn received it. This truth became the very foundation upon which their faith rested---all of which, says Paul, was "according to the Scriptures."

## **EYE-WITNESSES**

This recitation of the facts comes with simplicity and urgency. At this point in the discussion Paul wants to ensure that we know that these things really happened. This is no mere interesting idea or remarkable story. The resurrection really occurred in history. To give weight and power to what he has said, the apostle brings forth witnesses for the defense. We know that Jesus was raised because "He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time,...then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all,...He appeared to me also."

It appears that two kinds of evidence are on display here. In a court of law, juries find two things that are persuasive. The first is that the evidence for the case being tried be attested to not just by one, but by several witnesses. Paul demonstrates that not just several but five hundred people, most of whom were still alive when he wrote this letter, and so were available to confirm his words, saw the resurrected Jesus. And they would testify that it was in fact Jesus, not an apparition or a ghost, who appeared to them. In a resurrection body, fit for eternity, the Lord had eaten with them and fellowshiped with them. There was an abundance of evidence testifying to his resurrection.

And then Paul names three people to whom Jesus appeared, Cephas, James, and Paul himself, men for whom the evidence was deep as well as wide. Cephas, otherwise known as Peter, the self-promoter who was given

to much talk, the man who had protested that he would never deny his Lord but who would later do so three times when confronted by a teenage girl, had become a changed man. Why? It was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his appearance to Peter which set the apostle on his feet again. Peter was one who would attest to the fact of the resurrection and also the efficacy of that event.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, is the second eyewitness whom Paul mentions. We remember that at one time in his ministry the family of Jesus thought he was a disturbed man and sought to put him away for his own good. To them, Jesus was eccentric and incomprehensible. Even his own brothers failed to recognize his Messiahship. But to James, the little brother of Jesus who had rejected him during his earthly ministry, the Lord appeared after his resurrection. And this had the effect of making him also stand on his feet, and confirming him, with Peter, as a leader of the church.

Then we have this extraordinary description by the apostle of himself: "...and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, who am 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..." The words "untimely born," mean a miscarriage or an abortion. Paul regards himself as an ill-conceived, rejected person. On occasion, a pregnancy will terminate spontaneously because the fetus is diseased or malformed. The apostle is describing himself in these terms. He was a persecutor, an enemy of the church, an outsider who deserved nothing. Yet the Lord appeared to him. He refers humbly to the energy given him which enabled him to serve in the ministry to which he had been called.

Thus we have the testimony of a preponderance of evidence, and the depth of character of the three individuals called, to testify to the change that occurred in them because of the resurrection. The apostle is at pains to point out that these are reliable facts. (We will look at their implications later.) Be assured, however, says Paul, that we know what is true. Our hope for the forgiveness of our sins rests on a reality that cannot be taken away.

## **GOD AND MAN FOREVER**

Mary arrived at the tomb of Jesus only to discover that his body was no longer there. She tearfully cried, "They have taken my Lord and I do not know where they have put him." She felt she had lost him forever. But the answer to her anguish was the fact of the resurrection. Jesus himself called her by name. He had been raised from the dead, to be identified with humanity forever, and he would never again be taken away. If the resurrection is true, he cannot be taken away. Deity and humanity would forever be entwined. He died for our sins; he is raised so that our sins can be forgiven.

Thus we have an answer to the accuser of our hearts, to the world which seeks to undermine our faith, and even to the foolishness of churchmen who would seek to water down the facts. Our Lord has accomplished, in the sight of witnesses, the saving of his people. Those of us who once denied, rejected or persecuted him (like Cephas, James and Paul), promoting ourselves rather than the Lord God, can testify that the grace of God is effective, that the gospel is life-changing, and that it is based on facts that cannot be taken away.

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