

## He Is Risen

Mark 16:1-8

4/24/2011 Easter Sunday

Are witnesses reliable? It is the duty of a jury, for instance, to determine which witnesses have the most weight and credibility, so that they can make a determination about whether the defendant is guilty or not. What happens when you have two witnesses, whose testimony is contradictory, and you cannot decide which person's testimony has more weight? Some of these questions are of importance as we consider the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Did it really happen, we might ask? Many people who call themselves Christians do not believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. They believe that Jesus Christ swooned, and then revived later. Or they believe that the disciples stole away the body from the tomb. Some people have even claimed to have found the bones of Jesus. There are any number of ways that people attack the Resurrection these days. The question ultimately comes down to this: which witnesses have the most credibility? Do dead men rise up never, as the saying goes?

As we begin to look at this question, we must know one thing about the ancient world: they knew what resurrection was, and they also knew that it never happened. The universal testimony of the ancient world is that resurrection is to be understood as a person who was physically dead coming back to physical life. The soul would have to re-enter the body, and the body would have to come to life again. That is resurrection. The ancient world is also universal in its testimony that this never happens. Yes, the Jews hoped it would happen, and they interpreted some of the Old Testament stories as saying that it had happened in the case of the widow's son, but by and large, it was admitted, even by the Jews, that resurrection doesn't happen. It was not a common thing to claim that someone had actually come back from the dead. Now why is that important? It is important because when four Gospels claim that Jesus had come back from the dead, they were not saying this to a crowd of gullible people. The people who read the Gospels in the first century were not gullible, naive, easily-fooled people. They knew that dead people stay dead. So, they would have been a skeptical audience. This has a bearing on the witnesses that the Gospels choose to tell their story.

The first thing I want us to notice is that in all four Gospel accounts, it is women who first know that Jesus is resurrected from the dead. There are several things about that fact that are important. First of all, it is a tremendous honor for these women that they are the first to know that Jesus is resurrected. God is honoring women here. Secondly, we have to know that the Jews of the time did not regard women as having a legitimate standing as witnesses. Women were not regarded by Jews as having a legitimate witness in a court of law. But God regards women as most definitely having a legitimate witness in a court of law. Add to this now this singular fact: if the Gospel writers were making up a false story, claiming that Jesus was raised from the dead when He really wasn't, would they have included an account of women finding the empty tomb first? That would not have held up in a Jewish court of law, would it? So why would they include the fact that women first saw the resurrection *unless that is the way it actually happened?* And since God is giving these women the tremendous honor of being the first to know, it seems much more likely that the Gospel writers are telling the truth. For they would not have intentionally made their story harder to believe. This must, therefore, have been the way it actually happened. Notice this very realistic detail about the stone. The women were coming to anoint Jesus' body with spices. Of course, Jesus' body had already been prepared for burial by the woman who poured all that nard on Jesus. But the women wanted to anoint Christ's body. It was very understandable, then, that while they were on the way, they remembered that there was a huge stone in the way, and they had no way to remove it. They were probably hoping that someone would be there at the tomb who could help them roll it away. That is a very realistic detail that adds more weight to the testimony of these women. God is thus

elevating women to have the same standing before God as men have. They are citizens of God's kingdom every bit as much as men are. Their testimony has the same weight as the men. Let Christianity never be thought of as a religion that demeans women. It does no such thing! In fact, wherever Christianity goes, the lives the women inevitably become far better. They are treated better, and not viewed as inferior. In most other world religions, women are inferior in worth to men, but in Christianity, it is recognized that men and women are both made in the image of God. So the women are the first witnesses, and we have seen that their testimony is far more likely to be true than false.

Secondly, we have the testimony of the Gospel writers themselves. We have already alluded to this above, but it bears mentioning here, because it is a distinct testimony. All the disciples were among the actual eye-witnesses of Christ's resurrection. They claimed that they saw Jesus Christ in His risen state. The Gospel writers wrote down that Christ was actually raised from the dead. They did not record a swoon. And they are already aware of the idea that the Jews would claim that the disciples stole away the body of Christ, and so, by being aware of it, they are able to forestall anyone using that argument against the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel writers unanimously testify that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Are they biased witnesses? Of course they're biased witnesses! But does that make their witness false? By no means? As Ken Ham was fond of saying, the real question is which bias is the right bias to be biased with in the first place. So, if the Gospel writers are biased because they are inspired by God, then do they not have the correct bias?

And now, what about the rest of the apostles? They all witnessed to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, they were willing to die for that fact. Now, ask yourself this question: would anyone die for what he knew was a falsehood? Would you lay down your life for a lie? Didn't think so. And yet the disciples were in a position to know whether Jesus really was raised from the dead or not. That is because they are eye-witnesses of these events. So, if they all were willing to die for what they knew was a falsehood, does that not make them entirely deranged and crazy? No, it is far more likely that they died for what they knew to be true: that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead.

A third witness here is the testimony of history. Why in the world did Christianity explode and spread so incredibly rapidly in the centuries immediately following the Resurrection? Paul tells us that there were at least 500 witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus were not raised from the dead, do we really think it would be likely for a false story to gain so much credibility? Remember, the first century was not gullible, and they were very skeptical. All you have to do is read Acts 17 to know this. The people at Athens to whom Paul witnessed did not immediately believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. Many were skeptical, and in fact, many of them scorned the idea of a resurrection. They were people much like 21<sup>st</sup> century people, in fact. So, it is not likely that a false story about resurrection would gain much traction in the first century unless it were true.

A fourth witness is the testimony of the angel. The "young man" of verse 5 is described as an angel in the other accounts of the resurrection. Here there is a difficulty, for some of the other accounts mention two angels, and Mark tells us of only one. Do these accounts therefore contradict each other? By no means. Each Gospel writer emphasizes different things, as you would expect from eye-witness accounts. In Mark's mind, the most important thing is what was said in verse 6: "He is risen; he is not here." That is the message of the whole text, of course. Mark tends to be shorter, where Matthew, Luke, and John tend to fill out more of the details. So, the accounts do not contradict each other. If, on the other hand, these Gospel writers were making up something false, they would have changed their story to make sure that every last detail sounded exactly the same. In other words, these supposed contradictions are not contradictions at all, but are actually further proof that they are telling the truth! People who are

telling a lie in front of a judge, especially if it is two people telling a lie, always rehearse their story over and over again to make sure that it matches in every particular. That is not what we find in the Gospels. There is no error here, but there is a difference of perspective. One person remembers one thing, and one person remembers something else.

Lastly, and maybe most importantly, we have the testimony of Jesus Christ Himself. He said “destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” John tells us that Jesus was talking about the temple of His own body. Jesus also talked about the sign of Jonah: just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, so also will the Son of Man be in the belly of the earth for three days. But the implication of that is that just as the fish spit up Jonah on to dry ground, so also will Jesus come up out of the belly of the earth in resurrection. Now, how do we know about these words of Jesus? Only by the Gospel writers record of His words. But we have already established the likelihood that the Gospel writers were telling the truth. Therefore, they recorded Jesus' words accurately. And so we have the testimony of Jesus Himself to add to all these other testimonies.

At this point, we may ask the question: why are we going through all these testimonies about Jesus' resurrection? It is a fact, for instance, that it is impossible to argue a person into the kingdom of God. So why do all this? Well, for one thing, it is a great help to the faith of believers to see all these proofs that the Bible is telling the truth. Our entire hope and salvation depends on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul says this explicitly in 1 Corinthians: if Christ is not risen, our faith is futile, and we are still in our sins. If Christ has not risen from the dead, there is no salvation at all. Isn't it a good thing, then, to have some assurance that Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead? We can glean great comfort from this knowledge. Paul says further in 1 Corinthians that Jesus' resurrection guarantees the resurrection of His people. So our hope of resurrection depends on Christ's resurrection, as well. Our hope for seeing our loved ones again all depends on this knowledge of the resurrection. It is good to be assured that this faith rests on a solid foundation.

But what about unbelievers? No amount of arguing can persuade unbelievers to become followers of Christ. That is because a human being does not convert another human being. Only God can save sinners. What we have been saying about the resurrection is truth of the Bible. But only God can convince anyone of the truth of it. That comes by the Holy Spirit. So, here is the question for anyone here who might not believe in the resurrection of Christ? What is the basis for your hope? Do you have any hope? What about death? Do you have any hope concerning what is beyond the grave? Do you plan to just wing it? Or would you rather be prepared for death? Do remember that followers of Jesus have two resurrections: their souls are resurrected when they believe in Jesus Christ, and their bodies are resurrected at the final day of judgment. And believers have only one death, which in turn will be reversed. However, unbelievers only have one resurrection. Their bodies will be raised at the final day of judgment. But they will have two deaths: their souls are already dead now, and they will experience a fully conscious eternal death in Hell on Judgment Day, and of course, they will die in this life, as well. So which would you rather have: one death and two resurrections, or one resurrection and two deaths? That is the choice that is set before you. Choose you this day whom you shall serve, as Joshua says in chapter 24. Will you serve yourself, and thus die? Or will you serve Jesus, and live forever? Choose wisely. And you may not have a lot of time to make that choice. It is definitely not wisdom to think that one has a whole lifetime to make this decision. You don't have any guarantee that you have even one more day to give your life to Jesus Christ. Don't delay! God's call is for you to place your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thus to pass from death to life by God's grace and His Holy Spirit working in you.

For those who already know this resurrection power in their soul, there is great comfort for you in contemplating Christ's resurrection, and the certainty of it. It is not some kind of wishful thinking to

believe that we will one day experience a bodily resurrection. It is a certain and sure expectation that just as Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, so will we be raised from the dead.

So the witnesses have all spoken. There is only one possible verdict: Jesus Christ was really and truly raised from the dead. And we are not to suppose that we are the judge or the jury in this case of truth. Instead, we are to submit to the plain testimony of the Scriptures, which tells us of the women's testimony, the angel's testimony, the disciples' testimony, and Jesus' own testimony. Dead men rise up ever!