

Easter 3B: Luke 24: 36-48
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Can I get a witness?

In the year 312, Constantine the Great was about to embark on what became known as the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, a battle that would secure for him the undisputed leadership of the Roman Empire. Just before that battle was to begin, he had a heavenly vision. He saw in the sky the Greek letters, Chi Rho, which he took as the first letters of the word *Christos*, Christ, evidence he concluded of heavenly endorsement of his rule. That “omen,” together with his victory, led him a year later as emperor to end all legal prohibitions on the practice of Christianity. This was momentous, because up to this point, Christianity had been outlawed, but now Constantine made it a legally protected religion. At least that is how pious tradition has it. A more mundane explanation for Constantine’s license of the Christian faith was that he was a shrewd politician. He saw which way the political winds were blowing, and he decided to throw his lot in with the winning side. You see, by the early 4th century, despite years of persecution and legal discrimination, or more likely because of it, Christians had come to account for between a quarter and a half of the population of the Roman Empire, and their exponential growth seemed likely to continue.

The sincerity of Constantine’s conversion has been an ongoing debate, but a more interesting question is, How did this shift happen? How did a ragtag bunch of nobodies from the far edges of the Mediterranean world become such a dominant force in just two and a half centuries? Rodney Stark of Baylor University argues that the reason was sociological and ethical: Christianity modeled a nobler way of life than what was on offer elsewhere in the rather brutal society of the day. In Christianity, women were respected, while in classical culture they weren’t, and women in turn played a critical role in bringing men to the faith and attracting converts. At the same time, in an age of plagues, the readiness of Christians to care for all the sick, not just their own but all the sick, was important, as was the impressive witness of countless martyrs who died for their faith. Christianity also grew from within because Christians had larger families, a byproduct of their faith’s prohibition of contraception, abortion and infanticide, which were commonplace outside of the church.

For theologians who like to think that rational theological arguments won the day for the Christian faith, this sort of historical reconstruction is not particularly gratifying. Christianity’s explosion wasn’t due to superior beliefs but to the witness of everyday Christians. Professor Stark’s analysis still leaves us with a question, though: How did it all start? How did Christians come to model such a compelling, alternative way of life? How did Christianity spread from that gaggle of nobodies in the early first century A.D. to take over the Roman Empire?

What happened to them was Easter. There is no accounting for the rise of Christianity without it, without weighing the revolutionary effect of the Resurrection, of believers’ encounter with the crucified and risen Lord. As the pre-eminent biblical scholar N.T. Wright makes clear, that first generation answered the question Why they were Christians? with a straightforward answer:

because Jesus was raised from the dead. After looking at all the evidence, Wright concluded, nothing else can account for the spread of Christianity except Easter, except Jesus' resurrection.

Now, for all the significance that the Resurrection came to have, it's strange that, in the New Testament accounts of Easter, and what followed in the days immediately afterward, what the Gospel writers recorded was not the disciples' joy and relief at their Lord's resurrection, but rather their bafflement, skepticism and even fright about what had happened. Then again, if there's one thing you can count on, it's that when someone dies, they stay dead. But with Jesus' resurrection, now even that was up in the air!

As we heard a few weeks ago, in Mark's gospel, when the women find Jesus' tomb empty, they "went out and fled from the tomb...[and] said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." When the women finally do make it back to the disciples, and they relate their discovery, the men think the women are literally delirious, out of their minds. Then, in Luke's gospel, we hear of two disciples walking to Emmaus on Easter afternoon who haven't a clue as to who's talking with them along their way, not until he sits down to supper with them and he breaks bread. That's when they realize it was Jesus. They high-tail it back to Jerusalem to tell Jesus' other friends. When they get there, they find out that Peter has had a similarly strange encounter. And yet when "Jesus himself stood among them...the disciples were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a ghost." Throughout the post-Easter accounts, those we might expect to have been the first to understand what was going on, they simply didn't get it. All four Gospel accounts of the resurrection are absolutely consistent on one thing: no one believes the Good News when they hear it for the first time. No one.

Contrary to what some modern scholars have suggested, Jesus' coming back to life was hardly something his followers were expecting. Some Jewish groups at the time did believe in the resurrection of the dead, but that was supposed to take place at the end of time, not now, and it was to be universal. They never expected that *one person* would be resurrected but the rest of creation wouldn't. Nor would they have expected Jesus' "spirit" to live on in his followers after he died. Other prophets, other "messiahs," came and went in Jesus' day, and they routinely died at the hands of their pagan enemy, and their movements stalled and evaporated. Why would anyone have thought Jesus' followers would be any different? As the gospel accounts make clear, the disciples figured it was over and they were hanging around because they didn't know what to do next.

But then Jesus shows up, out of the blue, and bids them peace. They think it's a ghost—who wouldn't?—so Jesus assuages their fear, inviting them to touch him, and then he eats some food to show he's not some apparition, but the same flesh and blood man they knew before. With that cleared up—if only it was that easy—he tells them why he's come back, what they are to do next. He shows them how to read the Bible, how the whole of the Old Testament points to his death and resurrection, and that—here's the main point—not only do the Hebrew scripture witness to his death and resurrection—but they are to do so too. They are to be his witnesses, to give account of what they've seen, heard, and even touched. They are to tell others about him and to share with them the news of his resurrection and what it means, namely the forgiveness and reconciliation of all peoples.

“You are witnesses to these things,” Jesus says. What may not be immediately clear, though, is that he’s not saying this just to the first Christians, the disciples who are gathered there that first Easter Sunday, but to us too, to us latter-day disciples. We are witnesses too. We’ve heard or seen signs, evidence of Jesus’ resurrection in our own lives. Maybe not so grand as Jesus standing before us munching on some fish in our kitchen. But we’ve seen hurts forgiven, bodies and relationships miraculously healed, lives changed, chains broken, wrongs forgiven, new community formed and flourishing—all of which are signs of the Resurrection as sure as the living, breathing dead man. For as Clarence Jordan put it, “The crowning evidence that Jesus was alive was not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled away stone, but a carried-away church.”

Still, many of us are a little uneasy about the idea of being “witnesses.” As one theology student argued, “For two thousand years the church has done too much talking and not enough listening. I think today’s Christians must learn to do more listening. We need to hear what the world has to say to us before we presume to speak to the world.” And you can see her point. The pushy, arrogant, assertive Christian, attempting to ram Jesus down someone else’s throat before taking the time to learn anything about the other person—that sort of “evangelism” has given Christians a bad name.

To be honest, though, I’m not sure that that is our chief problem, not a problem for nice, polite, welcoming Episcopalians like ourselves. Few of us would ever be accused of being too pushy with the gospel, of being overbearing or arrogant in our Christian witness. No, our problem is perhaps the other extreme, being silent. We have lost our desire to share our faith with others—have lost even our ability to find the words to make a witness.

But even if that wasn’t true, the problem with this charge that Christians need to do more listening and less talking about our faith, is that behind it is often the assumption that the Christian faith is something that everybody already knows. Behind the charge that Christians have done too much talking, pushing, arguing, preaching, and speaking is the assumption that we are fortunate enough to live in a basically Christian land where people become Christians simply by being lucky enough to have been born into American society. Christianity, so this line of reasoning goes, is roughly synonymous with being a thinking, caring, sensitive person. The gospel is innate, inborn, something that only awaits discovery within you.

The problem with that rather passive posture is Easter. We can sit alone and quiet for hours, take long walks in the woods, or sit by the sea and watch the waves roll in. We can take a crash course in the noble beliefs of the world’s great religions. We can delve into the deepest recesses of our own psyche. But we will never, ever come to the notion that the Creator of the Universe would condescend to become one of us in order to be vilified and derided, then tortured to death, and then—rise from the dead and return to the very people who betrayed and forsook him. You can’t get from a pleasant walk in the woods to that! We come into this world with great talents and abilities that await our discovery and development. But none of us comes into the world thinking, “I think God raised crucified Jesus from the dead and thereby showed us the truth about God.” The death and resurrection of Jesus is not a human idea, some wish that wells up within us when we are at our best. The death and resurrection of Jesus is an event, something that happened outside of us rather than within us. And that’s why we’ve got to speak up, to tell others

that something has happened in the world, an event not of our own devising: God has raised Jesus from the dead.

Easter and public witness just go together. There's no way that the world can know the truth about God and the truth of the world's own destiny if no one has the courage to be a witness, "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" that God raised crucified Jesus from the dead.

Sure, our witness should be given humbly, after we have patiently, openly listened to others. But at some point we must speak, must tell others what has happened to us, what we have seen and heard. We must become Christ's witnesses or the world cannot know the truth about God and the world's true destiny.

And I tell you, outside our church doors there are people who are literally dying to get the news of Easter. Out there is someone who has been beaten down by discrimination and outright abuse. Someone else who just received a devastating diagnosis and feels utterly alone. Someone who can't imagine how anyone will ever forgive them for the heinous thing they've done. And someone else struggling against the demon known as addiction and just can't seem to get free. If we don't step up and become witnesses to the resurrection, how will people like this know about what happened on Easter? How will they get the message that death is not indomitable, that evil does not have the last word, that there is hope even in seemingly hopeless situations, if there is not a witness to tell them, if there is no one to share it with them?

Easter's message is not natural. What's natural is death, defeat, and the sense of hopelessness that comes when we think that there is no future other than what we can make in this life. Therefore, somebody has got to love people enough to tell them the news, news we simply can't keep to ourselves. So, what do you say, can I get a witness? Amen.