***Who’ll Be a Witness?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

March 31, 2024 (Easter)

Texts: Acts 10:34-43 and Mark 16:1-8

 In my first year of law school, I worked for a short time for a small firm in Harrisburg, PA that did criminal defense work. In addition to doing legal research, I was tasked with locating and interviewing witnesses or potential witnesses. The cases tended to arise from fights among local steelworkers – often in bars or at the local Moose Lodge – and generally involved conflict over money, a girlfriend, or some personal affront. It did not take long to learn that there were several kinds of witnesses. Some were impartial observers who just happened to be on the scene when the incident occurred; some of them were helpful in describing what they had seen, while others simply repeated the refrain of Sergeant Shultz from *Hogan’s Heroes*: “I know nothing!” even if they knew something. There were other witnesses who had their own agendas or prejudices and embellished their accounts with disparaging comments or fantastic facts unlike anything anyone else had seen that made them “unreliable witnesses.” And then there were some bold-faced liars! Rarely did all the stories match or were all the facts undisputed!

 These days the most helpful witnesses are those carrying cellphones which record the events in real time. The convictions of those responsible for killing George Floyd in Minneapolis and Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia were helped immeasurably by video evidence of the attacks. Police dashcams and bodycams have proved helpful in confirming or disproving allegations of wrongdoing. The video footage can be worth a thousand words, even when there are witnesses, for the credibility of the witness is often an issue – just ask Judge Ludwig!

 Now we have no video recording of the resurrection and that first Easter morning. None of the women at the tomb had cellphones with them, surprisingly enough. What we do have is the account of those Easter events as described by Mark in his gospel, the accounts of three other gospel writers, and the testimony of Luke in Acts and Paul in his letters. Those are the witnesses. While some of the details differ – Who was at the tomb? Did any of the disciples come? Did Jesus appear there or elsewhere? How did the stone get rolled away? How many angels were there? – many of the essential elements of those accounts are consistent.

 The first is that the tomb was open and the body of Jesus was missing. Mark confirms that the women saw Jesus’ body put into the tomb and the stone rolled in place to seal it just ahead of the sabbath – so they knew where they were going that Easter morning. Yet when they arrived at dawn’s early light, they found the stone rolled away and the body gone. While Matthew goes to great lengths to prove that the body could not have been stolen or carried away by Jesus’ disciples, Mark’s terse explanation comes from the mouth of that white clad figure who the women meet in the tomb – an angelic figure without the halo – who tells them Jesus has been raised. That same message is confirmed by all the gospel writers: the stone is rolled away and Jesus’ crucified body is missing because Jesus has been raised from the dead. None of them offer a description of the physics of resurrection itself. They all simply bear testimony to the empty tomb, the risen Lord, and the angel passing along the good news.

 The second element that is consistent is that the witnesses at the tomb were women. We should not be surprised, given that the same women were the last at the cross and were there when Jesus’ broken body was laid to rest in the tomb. With no funeral homes yet offering burial services, it was the women’s role to anoint the body, and that is exactly what Mary, Salome, and Mary Magdalene were intent on doing on their way to the tomb that Easter morning. They did not go there to see if Jesus had been raised from the dead as he had told them; there was no discussion of that possibility, just a concern for how they might roll away the stone. They went to anoint a dead body in the same place where they had seen it laid to rest two days before. So, it is not surprising that the women were there bright and early that morning after the sabbath; but for women to be the first witnesses to the empty tomb and resurrection – that was remarkable!

 In the patriarchal society in which they lived, these women had no standing as legal witnesses. Two men could corroborate an event as fact, but not three women. If someone were making up a story about the resurrection and wanted credible witnesses to make it legally valid, the women would never be chosen. Yet, all the gospel accounts confirm that it was the women who found the tomb empty, the women who were told he had been raised, the women who were sent to share that good news. These women who had come to terms with Jesus’ death – hence their plan to anoint his body – now were told to come to terms with his resurrection and to share that good news with the disciples and a world that would be more than skeptical!

 The women were told to be witnesses to all they had seen and heard, strange and unbelievable as it was. According to Mark, they were reluctant to do so. Can you blame them? As good as the news is, the message of an empty tomb and risen Lord is still odd and frightening; it defies logic and bears witness to a power greater than death, a power beyond our understanding, a power that belongs solely to God. To say that Jesus is risen is to say that death could not contain him when it manages to contain everyone else and that those who sought to silence him by his crucifixion have failed. How do you tell that to anyone, even the disciples? How do you tell them you’ve seen an angel saying, “He has been raised!” without sounding like you’ve lost all your marbles? How do you tell them that the man they saw crucified, the Jesus they knew to be dead and buried, would now meet them in Galilee, and have them believe it enough to go? How can you share the extraordinary things you have seen, heard, and experienced, without being dismissed as a lunatic? How can you be a credible witness to the resurrection when it is so hard to grasp it yourself? Yet, can you do any less? Could the women do any less, given the holy experience of that morning?

 According to Mark, they fled the tomb and remained silent. The text ends in mid-sentence: “*they said nothing to anyone, for…*” Of that odd ending biblical scholar Lamar Williamson notes:

*When is an ending not an end? When a dead man rises from the tomb – and when a Gospel ends in the middle of a sentence*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In later centuries believers will amend Mark’s gospel with stories they heard from other sources, so that the reader is not left hanging and despairing because the story was not told. But Mark’s original text leaves the ending unresolved: “*They said nothing to anyone, for…”*

 We know they must have said something, because the story of Easter did not end there with the women fleeing in silence; Jesus appeared to others, as we heard Luke describe in Acts, and they became witnesses to the story of Jesus’ resurrection. The continuing proof of that faithful witness is our presence here with alleluias on our lips, for had they all remained silent, we would not be here. In a recent interview in *The Christian Century,* Don Abram suggests:

*People of faith are people of faith because we heard a story. That tells me that there’s power in telling stories. Hearing a story can change your life. I believe that folk can change the trajectory of their life or how they relate to those they perceive as other because of a story.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

 Has the trajectory of your life changed because of that story? Does it alter how you look at others, at your life, at death? Today we bear witness to the power of that story, to the true testimony of those women at the tomb. But it is not only here that we affirm it, for we are called to be witnesses beyond these walls to what we have heard, seen, and believe. Odd as it may seem, the resurrection is no easier for us to grasp two thousand years and umpteen generations after it happened than it was for the women at the tomb that Easter morning. They became faithful witnesses! Are you such a witness to that good news, a credible witness telling the story of Jesus’ resurrection? It is not easy to do so; it demands far more than sitting here singing your alleluias and then heading out to eat your Easter feast and enjoy the sunshine or watch a little more March Madness. For, you are asked to be a witness, not just this Easter day, but every day. In the words of Morgan Roberts:

*[T]he empty tomb is much more than an event, the historicity of which we are asked to accept; it is the summons to an entirely new way of living. The real proof of the empty tomb is our way of life![[3]](#endnote-3)*

 Do you offer any such proof by your way of life, or are you telling no one, for…?

 In his 1891 autobiography, William White identifies his grandmother as one who offered such living proof for him. He writes:

*I was carefully trained from an early age to read the word of God. This training I received chiefly from my paternal grandmother, whose maiden name was Starke. She was a woman of vigorous intellect, and eminently pious. She died in great peace when I was in the sixteenth year of my age. I have always believed that her bright example and faithful instructions did more to lay the foundation of my character and life than all other instrumentalities combined.”[[4]](#endnote-4)*

Have you made such a difference for anyone? Might you make such a difference for someone! Sixty years ago, Marvin Gaye sang, “Can I get a witness?” and God asks the same question today. Can I get a witness? Who’ll be a witness for the resurrection? Who’ll be a credible witness for the good news? “Who’ll be a faithful witness for me?” says the Lord. Maybe you! Amen

1. Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation Commentary: Mark*, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1983, p.283 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Don Abram interviewed by Morganne Talley in “Black, Queer, and Christian”, *The Christian Century*, February 2024, p.67 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. F. Morgan Roberts, *A Beautiful View: A Friendlier Christianity as a Way of Life*, Cascade Books:2018, p.59 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *William S. White D.D. and His Times: An Autobiography*, ed. by his son Rev. H.M. White, D.D., Presbyterian Committee of Publications: Richmond, 1891, p.22 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)