

Introduction

When I was a kid I remember adults talking about where they were when JFK was shot. I couldn't figure out why so many remembered where they were. I kept wondering why so many of them needed *an alibi*. "I was at the grocery store when the guy on the PA announced everyone should gather around the tiny black and white TV at the front of the store." As a child this was history—*ancient* history. Everyone had an alibi! I simply couldn't understand why so many grown-ups remembered it.

I remember being in eighth grade in Earth Science class when the space shuttle exploded—the first time. I remember working for a trucking company in 2001 and talking to a driver who happened to be driving through New York. He told me about a plane crashing into a building. We both wondered if the pilot had a heart attack. I walked over to the drivers' lounge across the parking lot and watched the second plane hit *live*.

I remember my wedding day like it was just 11,292 days ago—that's 30 years and eleven months. I remember the births of my children. I remember the day the refs gave the Lakers 21 fourth-quarter free throws to the Celtics' six in a Game 7 of the NBA Finals decided by just four points. There's something about significant events that shape our lives. It was only when I saw the second plane hit the World Trade Center that I understood why so many remembered where they were when JFK was shot.

There is something powerful about being an eyewitness to a significant event. Whether it were an event that shaped the entire world like a terrorist attack or something that shaped my life like the births of my kiddos, the memories of what happened remain fresh. Both shape my view of the world, albeit in entirely different ways. Imagine, then, being a witness to the greatest event in history. We're in Acts 10.

Acts 10:34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the

prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Acts 10:34–43

All Nations

In the beginning of the chapter we read of Cornelius, a Roman centurion who “feared God”—that is, he did not worship the Greek and Roman gods but also had not converted to Judaism. That is, he had not embraced circumcision and did not eat kosher, though he worshiped the one true God. One day while praying he had a vision. In that vision God told him through an angel that Peter would visit him with a message from God. Cornelius was instructed to send messengers to Peter to invite him to come.

The next day Peter had a vision. He was hungry and while his hosts were preparing a meal he had a vision of a meal. A giant sheet descended from heaven filled with all sorts of animals. Peter was told to rise, kill, and eat. Peter refused, for among those animals were “unclean” animals—animals prohibited by the law of Moses. Peter was a devout Jew. He lived by the law of Moses and sought to honor the Lord Jesus by continuing that obedience.

God told him he could not call unclean what God had called clean. This happened three times. I read somewhere that the third time God had to say, “Peter, there’s bacon in the sheet”, and only then did Peter reply, “Yes, Lord, I will obey” and finally Peter enjoyed a meal. While the vision was certainly showing Peter that Jesus had, in fact, declared all foods clean, just as we read in Mark 7:19, that wasn’t the Lord’s primary point here in Acts 10. Yes, Peter was free to eat all sorts of meat, but the Lord was teaching him a greater truth.

As he was pondering this vision the Spirit spoke to him and told him three men were looking for him. Peter was to go with them. When they arrived they told him they were there on behalf of Cornelius because an angel told him to get Peter. Peter traveled with them to the home of Cornelius.

This was extraordinary, for Peter, being a devout Jew who followed Jesus, would never step foot into the home of a Gentile. Such places were ritually unclean. Peter makes this exact point in verses 28–29:

Acts 10:28 And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.”

Acts 10:28–29

Peter, being Peter, essentially says, “You know I’m not supposed to be with riff-raff like you—but I’m not allowed to call you that anymore, so why am I here?” Cornelius then reiterates the story. He was praying in his house and an angel appeared to him, telling him to send for Peter. He did so and now he—and all his household—is waiting to hear whatever it is that Peter has to say. So we come to our text.

Peter begins by saying he finally gets it. He finally understands the vision after several days of pondering it. It is when Cornelius, a Gentile, desires to sit at the feet of the apostle and listen that Peter understands that the vision was less about eating bacon and pork chops

are more about the nations being invited to follow Jesus. He says he understands that God shows no partiality. Being a devout Jew who loves the Lord Jesus, surely Peter was aware of what the law said!

Deut 10:17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. ¹⁸ He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹ Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:17–19

Peter is making a reference to this text. Now, after all these years, after being instructed by Jesus to make disciples of *all nations*, Peter gets it. He understands what it means that the Lord shows no partiality. A person in *any nation* who fears him and who does what is right is acceptable to God. Ethnicity and nationality has no bearing on whether God will accept a person. God looks for faith. It is faith that causes reverence and awe—fear—and this is what pleases the Lord.

One wonders what has taken him so long to understand this. He heard Jesus' teaching first-hand. He was there when Jesus told the parable of the tenants, how God was taking his vineyard from those who refused to receive the Son and was giving it to others who would produce its fruit. He was there as Jesus ministered among Gentiles in the Decapolis. He was there in John 10 when Jesus said he had sheep in other flocks that had to be found and brought into his flock so there would be "one flock, one shepherd". He was there when Jesus sent the Samaritan woman as his evangelist to her fellow Samaritans. He was there in Matthew 8 when Jesus said many foreigners would come from the east and the west to join Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was there when Jesus cleansed the temple and declared his house would be a house of prayer *for all the nations*. Now, finally, he gets it.

The Gospel

While Cornelius was no longer an idolater, but worshiped the God of Israel, he did not know the gospel. His understanding of truth was very limited. In verse 36 Peter tells him and all those who were in his house that God sent word to Israel—the gospel was preached to Israel *through* Jesus Christ. Then he adds a clarification: "he is Lord of all".

This was a significant declaration on two levels. First, Cornelius was a Roman centurion. Centurions were extremely well-paid—they received about sixteen times as much as a regular soldier. They were Roman citizens and were highly regarded officers in the Roman army. He was part of the Italian cohort and was stationed in Caesarea. He was stationed there for quite some time as his entire family was with him. He has roots established in the area. It is likely this is how he encountered the truth of the God of Israel and had come to reject the gods of his own people.

Being a Roman citizen and an army officer, the claim that Jesus is Lord of all would have been striking. Caesar was said to be lord. To say Jesus is Lord is to say Caesar is not. This would be an extraordinary confession for a Roman citizen and army officer. Peter doesn't

pull his punches here. He says the title “Lord” rightly belongs to Jesus. To follow Jesus is to acknowledge he is Lord and so he proclaims the truth to Cornelius and his household.

There’s another layer as well. In the first century the Jews would not say the divine name YHWH. This was an attempt to avoid saying the name in vain. Even today Jewish folk often refer to God as “Hashem”—*the Name*. In the Greek version of the Scriptures the Jewish translators translated YHWH as “Lord”. When Christians in the first century confessed Jesus is Lord, the emphasis was on his *identity*, not his *title*. In Greek the emphasis is more pronounced: Lord is Jesus. YHWH is Jesus. The God of Israel has come in human form. His name is Jesus.

Peter begins proclaiming the gospel to Cornelius and his family by correctly identifying Jesus. Church, the gospel begins here, or it isn’t the gospel. The gospel is about Jesus. It is the proclamation of Jesus. Jesus is the center of our faith. Jesus is. The Bible isn’t—the Bible is the Word of God, but it isn’t the center of our faith. Politics isn’t. Sports isn’t. Cultural expression isn’t. The center of our faith is the Lord Jesus. The gospel message is the message of Christ and Christ alone.

Peter continues that message. Since Cornelius had been stationed in Caesarea for a long time, about 60 miles or so from Jerusalem, Peter says he and his family had heard what had been happening in Judea. It started with John who was baptizing many. We see the Trinity in verse 38: God the Father anointed Jesus the Son with the Holy Spirit and filled him with power.

Being God in human form Jesus went about doing good. He performed miracles. It’s interesting to note that in the first few centuries no one denied the miracles had taken place. There were too many eyewitnesses. Even the scribes and Pharisees couldn’t deny the miracles. Surely a Roman centurion stationed nearby had heard the stories as well.

This would include stories of Jesus’ power over demons. He was healing those oppressed by the devil, bringing deliverance and salvation. Peter says he and the other apostles were witnesses of all the things that Jesus did, both throughout the land of Israel and especially in Jerusalem. That is, they witnessed *history*. These are not made-up stories. The gospel is not a parable for living a better life. It is the proclamation of who Jesus is and what he has done.

The gospel is rooted in history. The facts are not hidden. The things Jesus did were witnessed by others. The gospel of Jesus isn’t a series of visions written down by a single man, like the Quran. The gospel of Jesus is not some mysterious writing on gold plates only ever seen by three men like the book of Mormon. The stories of Jesus were witnessed by all sorts of people who then shared those stories they had witnessed, so that Peter could say even to the family of a Roman centurion, “you yourselves know what happened”.

It wasn’t just the miracles like healing the sick and walking on water and casting out demons. They all knew that Jesus had been put to death. Peter says this death was on a tree. Again he is alluding to Deuteronomy.

Deut 21:22 And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree,²³ his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

Deuteronomy 21:22–23

Peter knew the law. He knew what he was saying when he said Jesus was put to death by hanging him on a tree. He was cursed by God. He knows, as Paul put it in Galatians, that Jesus redeems us from the curse by becoming a curse for us. As the prophet Isaiah said, “he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” and “he shall bear their iniquities”. Again as Paul put it, “he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”.

The reason God shows no partiality is the righteousness of Christ is given to all who trust in him. It has no basis whatsoever in nationality or culture. It has no basis in religious upbringing or what sort of sins one participated in. It has no basis in education or income level. It has no basis in which party the person votes for, or even what priorities one uses for voting. It has no basis in gender. The gospel is rooted entirely in the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, died, and buried.

It doesn’t end there, of course, for Peter says God raised him on the third day. Jesus defeated death. He rose from the dead and walked out of his tomb in victory. This is the gospel! Jesus is victorious over our greatest enemy!

Witnesses

Peter continues proclaiming the truth of God in Christ. When God raised Jesus from the dead he appeared to people, but not all people. He appeared to those who were chosen by God to be witnesses, those with whom Jesus would eat and drink *physically*. This would be the Twelve Apostles, of course. There was also Paul who would be an apostle. There were, in total, about 500 eyewitnesses of the resurrection.

Why was this God’s choice? God chose this method because of the sort of evidence he desired for the resurrection. Peter says God chose certain individuals as witnesses, witnesses who ate and drank with Jesus, verifying he was no ghost. God commanded these witnesses to preach the gospel to the people and to *testify* that he is the judge of the living and the dead.

New Testament scholar Babu Immanuel Venkataraman explains.

He stressed that this resurrection was not merely some hallucination, but an actual event of which the followers of Jesus were the *witnesses*. Further proof that this was a real, historical event was that he and others actually *ate and drank* with Jesus.

The early church never used the empty tomb as evidence of Jesus’ resurrection. The disciples were the real witnesses who could confirm what had happened.

Babu Immanuel Venkataraman, South Asia Bible Commentary

Think of what it means that a group of ordinary people became witnesses to an otherwise outlandish claim. Where were the disciples on Holy Saturday? They were in hiding. They were fearful. They knew they would be next. Jesus had died. They witnessed *that*. But then on the third day something extraordinary happened, and they were no longer fearful men in hiding. On the day of Pentecost Peter boldly and publicly proclaimed the truth of Jesus:

Acts 2:32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.

Acts 2:32

and

Acts 3:15 and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.

To this we are witnesses.

Acts 3:15

Notice the connection between the resurrection and their witness and testimony. When the leaders of Jerusalem were angry at their preaching, rather than hiding they witness and testify boldly. They again told them that while they killed Jesus, God raised him from the dead. Here was their response to the boldness of the apostles:

Acts 4:13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

Acts 4:13

They weren't formally educated men, yet they had been with Jesus! The leaders didn't understand just how true it was, for they ate and drank with the resurrected Jesus, and this gave them all the courage and boldness necessary to be his witnesses.

It wasn't just the Twelve, however. Paul was an educated man. He studied under the legendary Gamaliel. And he hated Jesus. He traveled around persecuting followers of Jesus for daring to claim God's Messiah had been crucified—killed on a tree—for he could not imagine how God could curse his own Messiah. Then one day Jesus appeared to him, very much alive. Paul could no longer deny the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, he is the Savior of the world, for God had indeed cursed him but then raised him from the dead. Thus Jesus redeems us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse. *That curse was broken when the stone rolled away.*

Being witnesses of the resurrected Christ, they called for a response to this gospel. Over and over again we see a similar call. When Peter, for the first time, boldly proclaimed the truth of Christ publicly and said God raised him from the dead, the crowd responded with a question:

Acts 2:37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 2:37–38

The right response to the gospel is a public identification with Christ. What was their response?

Acts 2:41 So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Acts 2:41

When Ananias fully explains Paul's encounter with the resurrected Christ, he was baptized. When Lydia in Acts 16 heard the gospel and believed, she was baptized. The right response to the truth of the gospel is baptism. It is the public confession that Jesus is Lord. But! Those who have already been baptized also continue to publicly confess Jesus is Lord, though baptism is a one-time thing. See what Paul says.

Rom 6:3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3–5

Church, this is union with Christ. We are crucified with Christ. We are buried with Christ. We are raised from the dead with Christ. One day our bodies will be resurrected. Until that day, we walk in newness of life. As we do this we are remembering our baptism. We are witnessing and testifying to the resurrection of Jesus, a resurrection we participate in.

Resurrecting

In our text Peter proclaims *the gospel* to Cornelius. Too often we limit “the gospel” to just the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Yes, he proclaimed the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, but he also proclaimed that Jesus preached and taught, that he healed the sick, that he cast out demons. Yes, he died and rose again—that is central to our faith! We have, however, four books called that each contain the gospel preached by four particular witnesses. We have the *Gospel According to Matthew*, another according to Mark, another to Luke, and finally the Gospel According to John. They preached a whole lot more than just the story of his death and resurrection.

When Jesus calmed the storm, that was good news—the gospel—for he was indicating that one day he would restore all things. When he fed the 5,000, that was good news—the gospel—for he was indicating that one day the curse would be lifted. When he cast out demons that was good news—the gospel—for he was indicating he had defeated the powers of evil. When he healed the sick and cured the blind and the deaf and when he cleansed the leper, that was good news—the gospel—for he was indicating that one day he would resurrect us. When he told the woman caught in adultery, “Go and sin no more”, that was good news—the gospel—for he was indicating he had come to defeat sin and death.

All that Jesus did and said is the gospel, because Jesus is the gospel. He is the good news. The gospel is the good news of who Jesus is and what he has done. You might wonder, then, why Paul summarizes the gospel as he does in 1 Corinthians 15. There he seems to indicate the sum total of the gospel is the death and resurrection. That's not what he's indicating. He's indicating something far greater. I love how Esau McCaulley put it.

What we need is a sign of his victory. The feeding of the 5,000 or the walking on water is great, but if it can all be unraveled by death, then what is the point?
Dr. Esau McCaulley

As great as the miracles of Jesus were, without the resurrection we would just die having been healed or having been fed or having witnessed wonderful things—but we’d still die and with no hope for the future. As Dr. McCaulley put it, if all those wonderful things Jesus did and said can be undone by death, why does it matter? Church, the miracles he performed and the truth he proclaimed cannot be unraveled by death! Peter said as much on the day of Pentecost!

Acts 2:24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Acts 2:24

Because it is not possible for death to hold onto Jesus, it is not possible for the gospel to be unraveled by death! The gospel *is* good news and the gospel will *remain* good news. This means no matter what this life brings, no matter the hardship or the suffering, no matter the pain or the source of it, no matter what difficulty you face, the worst this world can do to you is end your life, *and how will that turn out?* Death is our greatest enemy but not even death could hold Jesus, which means there is nothing—literally *nothing*—that can hold back his promises.

This doesn’t magically lessen the pain you may be experiencing. It doesn’t cause the sense of loss to evaporate. It doesn’t mean your struggles are suddenly over. It means there is hope *in the midst of the storm*. It means that no matter how dark the night, the darkness cannot stop the sun from rising. It means that God, the one who began the good work in you, *will be* faithful to complete it. Not even death can stop him.

We know all of this because of the witnesses God chose to proclaim his resurrection. We know that each one of the Twelve Apostles suffered greatly for preaching the resurrection. Only John was not killed for his faith, though he spent years in exile and suffered greatly for his faithfulness. Why? Why would these men proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus, especially when his death would have been a huge stumbling block?

Chuck Colson, who went to prison for the Watergate scandal during the Nixon years, famously said that the twelve apostles kept their story straight for 40 years, despite being persecuted and tortured for it, and even though eleven of them were martyred for it—brutally murdered—they stayed faithful to that same story that Christ died, Christ was buried, Christ is risen from the dead. He said the twelve men involved in the Watergate scandal cracked after just three weeks of *legal* pressure. They weren’t being persecuted. They weren’t physically abused. They weren’t facing torture and death, yet they cracked after just three weeks and their lies crumbled into dust. For this reason he knew the resurrection was true. It is the best explanation of the evidence. Jesus Christ really and truly walked out of his tomb after being really and truly dead.

The apostles remained faithful witnesses because they themselves were being resurrected. They, having been united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, were walking in newness of life. Their minds were being constantly renewed by the Holy Spirit of Christ who was given to them. Their *lives* testified to the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Application

You might be wondering, “What about us? We didn’t witness the resurrection.” That’s true, but we have the testimony of those eyewitnesses who endured great suffering and even death for daring to proclaim what they saw with their own eyes. We don’t have the apostles anymore, though we have their words passed on through the centuries. We have other evidence, however.

We launched New City Church on April 24, 2011—5,110 days ago. Thirteen years, 11 months, and 27 days ago. That’s 730 Sundays ago. In this time I have seen Jesus at work in his body. I have witnessed him provide for people in incredible ways. I have witnessed healing and transformation. I have seen, first hand, people rescued from sin and death by the power of the gospel.

I see this in my own life in the ways God has humbled me and has made me more gentle with others. I have seen firsthand how God has transformed my thinking and enabled my faithfulness. If you ask any of the other elders they would say the same. I’ve seen them change in ways I could not predict or even imagine—nor could they.

We didn’t start a new church nearly fourteen years ago because we wanted a church that does things “the right way”. We didn’t start a new church because we wanted to control the style of music or the programming offered or to get our name put on a website somewhere. We didn’t plant this church because we were bored.

We planted this church because the church is where God works among his people. It is where transformation happens. The church has been given the mission of making disciples, men and women who follow Jesus and observe all that he commanded. We planted this church knowing that since this is where the resurrected Lord works most powerfully, we would see the fruit of his power in you, his people. The church is where the resurrected Lord calls people out of darkness and into his marvelous light. He calls each and every one of us to be his witnesses, to testify to his resurrection.

The church is his witness on earth. But how do we testify to his resurrection when we weren’t there? We haven’t seen the resurrected Christ! Yes, but we *experience* him. We experience the power of his resurrection through transformed lives, by walking in *newness of life*. We experience the power of the gospel when God calls us to faith and salvation. You and I are walking billboards proclaiming the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. We demonstrate Christ is risen from the dead when we turn from our sin and follow him. We show others the truth of the resurrection when we desire our sin less and desire him more.

As the apostle Paul said to the Philippians, Oh, that I would know him and know the power of his resurrection! Oh, that everything else in this life would fade to dust in comparison to knowing the risen Savior, that we might experience his resurrection power in us.

The gospel is good news, church, for it is the promise that Jesus gives himself to us.