

THEY SAW HIM ALIVE

by Ray C. Stedman

I am sure it is not wholly coincidental that the approaching the Easter season finds us in the great resurrection chapter of the Scripture, First Corinthians 15. Looking at the preaching schedule, we should be at the very climax of this chapter on Easter Sunday.

Everyone here who is a Christian knows that the fundamental question upon which Christianity ultimately rests is, "Did Jesus Christ actually, literally, and physically, rise from the dead?" Everything hangs on that question. Well, that is the theme of this chapter, and this section of First Corinthians is one of the most significant passages in the Word of God that states that question most profoundly. As you read it, you see that there is a whole chorus of voices from the 1st century that say loudly and clearly, "Yes, he did rise from the dead. We saw him; we talked with him; we handled him." (John says that in his letter {cf, 1 Jn 1:1}.) "We ate and drank with him, {cf, Acts 10:41}. It was unmistakably Jesus. We recognized him by the marks of crucifixion still in his body, in his hands and in his feet. Our encounters with him were so frequent, so full and so satisfying that we have never been the same since. When he rose from the dead it completely changed our lives." Christianity has always rested, therefore, on that powerful evidence of eye witnesses who saw him alive from the dead.

The other night I saw on television the film on *Big Foot*, the strange, ape-like creature that supposedly lives in the forests of Northern California, Oregon and Washington. This film was examining the question, "Is there such a creature?" and the answer it gave was, "Yes, there is, and here are the people who have seen him." Then there came a series of presentations from various individuals and groups of individuals who had actually seen and bore witness of some of these creatures.

As I watched that film, I realized that this is the same kind of evidence that Christianity rests on. If we believe that Jesus rose from the dead on the basis of the accounts of eye witnesses who saw him and talked about him and told us what it was like, it would be very difficult to escape the logic that we must also believe in the existence of Big Foot. These people who saw and encountered these animals were very much the same kind of people -- artless, simple people, not trying to put something over, with no axe to grind, but bearing witness to an experience and an encounter they had had. Now I am not trying to equate the importance of believing in Big Foot with the importance of the resurrection of Christ. In fact, there is a very remarkable and important difference between the level of evidence for believing in Big Foot and believing in the resurrection. At the end of this message I want to tell you what that difference is, if you have not caught it yourself before then. But I do want to stress the point, and it is enough for us at this moment to recognize that the resurrection of Jesus is supported by the most powerful line of evidence that we human beings know anything about. It is direct, unquestionable eyewitness evidence, the kind that is employed in every courtroom in America.

In Chapter 15, the apostle reviews briefly this line of evidence. We have already looked at his account of the gospel and how he says the resurrection is an integral part of it: We believe "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures [the prediction of the Scriptures], that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." The combination of the prediction of the Old Testament and the experience reported in the New is what forms the strongest and most powerful line of argument for the resurrection. This is what the apostle says:

... and that he appeared to Cephas, [another name for the Apostle Peter] then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. {1 Cor 15:5-8 RSV}

According to the Gospel record the actual first appearance of our Lord was not to Peter but to Mary

Magdalene. As the Gospel accounts tell us, she was first at the tomb and she mistook him for the gardener on that Easter Sunday morning. It was only when he spoke to her that she realized that this was the Lord, and she held him by the feet and worshipped him. Then he sent her away to find the disciples. But in the chauvinistic mentality of that 1st century, a woman's testimony did not count. Paul, therefore, is conceding a point here, perhaps to the age in which he lived, by listing the Apostle Peter as the one who first bore witness to the resurrection of Christ.

We do not know when and where exactly our Lord appeared to Peter. I am sure Peter was the apostle who was hurting the most at this particular time. He had denied his Lord in that black night before the crucifixion. Three times he had professed that he did not even know him, and he supported it with curses and oaths. It was only when he realized what he had done that he went out into the night and wept bitterly. You can imagine how Peter must have been feeling all through this terrible time after the crucifixion of Jesus when he was suffering from the awful pangs of his guilt over this denial.

I think it is for that reason that Jesus sought him out first. That is like him, isn't it? He found him in his brokenness, in his heartbreak, in his hatred of himself, in his awful sense of guilt, and he forgave him. Later on, in Galilee, John tells us, Jesus restored him to his public office again.

I have always wished I could have been hiding nearby, watching, when our Lord saw Peter. What a moving scene that must have been when Jesus found him and forgave him. I know how Peter must have felt, because the Lord has done this with me on numerous occasions when I did not feel I had any right (and did not have any right) to be forgiven at all, and still he forgave me. The Gospels confirm this appearance of Jesus, without describing the event, in several references. Paul lists this time as the very first, then, of the appearances of our Lord to his apostles.

Then the second was to all the apostles, to the twelve, Paul says. Here the apostle undoubtedly is grouping together several appearances that our Lord made to the twelve apostles. Two of these appearances were on the Emmaus road that first afternoon after his resurrection when he appeared as a stranger and then later identified himself to them as they were sitting at bread together. That same evening he appeared suddenly in the midst of ten of the apostles. (Judas, of course, was gone, and Thomas was absent.) He revealed himself to them there, and showed that he was truly the risen Lord. He sat and ate with them, actually, on that occasion. Then, one week later, Thomas was present and Jesus appeared again. This time he invited Thomas to come and put his finger in the wounds in his hands, to feel his side, and establish clearly to his own satisfaction that he was indeed the risen Lord.

There are other appearances to the disciples that are gathered up in a phrase or two in the Scriptures which suggest that Jesus repeatedly appeared to them during a whole forty-day period and that he taught them many things during that time. We are not given the details, but Paul gathers this all up in these words, "he appeared ... then to the twelve."

Paul's third reference is to an event that we have no account of directly in the Scriptures, although we do have some brief reference to it. He says:

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. {1 Cor 15:6 RSV}

Every generation, the theory is propounded that Jesus really did not rise from the dead physically, that the disciples were so caught up in the wonder of his personality, that they so wanted him back they actually hallucinated and imagined they saw him. But this event, of course, can hardly fit that category, for here there were over five hundred individuals. Now it is hard enough to get one person to hallucinate, but to get five hundred people from various backgrounds and attitudes, etc., to do so all at once is simply incredible.

I think this occurred up on a mountainside in Galilee, for even before his crucifixion the Lord had said that he would meet his disciples in Galilee after the resurrection. The first message he sent by the women at the tomb was, "go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me," {cf, Matt 28:10}. Now you can imagine that word of that spread rapidly throughout the whole believing community and everybody who could

get away headed for Galilee. Who would have wanted to miss that most exciting of all Christian meetings? So it is no wonder there were five hundred or more waiting for him on the mountainside, and to them he appeared.

We have a brief reference to this in the closing words of Matthew's Gospel where we are told that our Lord appeared in Galilee and there he gave them the words of the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you," {Matt 28:18-20 RSV}. With those words he sent them, and all the generations since, out to the farthest reaches of the earth. Now Paul says to these Corinthians, "most of these people are still alive." When he wrote this letter it was about 25 years after the crucifixion, and most were still alive. Some had fallen asleep, as he said, but if the Corinthians wanted to check it out, there were still many hundreds of people who were there and had seen Jesus and could bear testimony to it.

Paul's fourth reference is to another appearance that is not reported in the Gospels:

Then he appeared to James. {1 Cor 15:7a RSV}

The James mentioned here is undoubtedly the half-brother of Jesus, the oldest remaining son of the family that grew up in Nazareth. John tells us in his Gospel that his brothers did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. And you can understand why. It would have been very hard to believe that someone you made mud pies with, someone you ran through the fields and went skinny-dipping with and all these other things that kids do was the Son of God, the Creator of all the universe.

So his brothers did not believe in him until the resurrection. It was that phenomenal event, that magnificent recovery, that finally convinced James that Jesus was the Son of God. We do not know when he appeared to him. Again, it would have been fascinating to have been there, and heard what he said, and how he revealed himself to his brother. But it is this James who wrote the *Epistle of James* in our New Testament. If you read through that letter you will see how reverently he refers to the Lord Jesus. He calls him twice the "Lord Jesus Christ," and once the "Lord of Glory," so that his brother was now solidly and firmly convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Then the fifth in Paul's list of Jesus' appearances is:

Then [he appeared] to all the apostles. {1 Cor 15:7b RSV}

This is the occasion recorded in the first chapter of Acts when our Lord led his disciples, his believing band, out to the Mount of Olives. There, looking out over the city of Jerusalem, he began to teach them and speak to them. While he was speaking, it says, they noticed his body rising from the ground. To their amazement, he ascended into the heavens until a cloud received him, and he disappeared out of sight. They stood there gazing into the sky, and two strange men, whom they afterwards realized were angels, said to them, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven," {Acts 1:11 KJV}. With that our Lord disappeared permanently from earth. Only a few ever saw him after that, but he changed his relationship with his disciples, and this ended the post resurrection appearances, except, as Paul goes on to say:

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. {1 Cor 15:8 RSV}

This was clearly that remarkable scene on the Damascus road when young Saul of Tarsus, burning in his hatred against the Christian cult, was trying to eliminate it. Suddenly a light brighter than the sun shone around him. He was blinded by it and was thrown to the ground. He heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" {Acts 9:4 RSV}. He said, "Who are you, Lord?" {Acts 9:5a RSV}, and the voice identified itself, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting;" {Acts 9:5b RSV}. Now Paul never forgot, not only that event, but the words of Jesus, that he was the one who was persecuting the church, persecuting Jesus himself.

That event changed Paul's life. He never could get out of his mind that reminder of his burning hatred of Christians. That explains this phrase he uses about himself, "one untimely born." He means, by that, that he did not come to spiritual birth in the usual, proper way. The word he employs really means "miscarriage." He saw himself as a miscarriage, or, as some have translated it, an "abortion." Had Paul written his spiritual biography, the title would have not been *Born Again*, it would have been *The Miscarriage*, *The Abortion*, or something like that. This is what he thought of himself, largely because of the way he came to birth.

He is thinking of the twelve apostles as being born in a very normal way. When they heard the word of the Lord, they began to believe it. Gradually it developed in their minds and hearts until they came to the place where they believed it totally. In this way their spiritual birth followed a normal pregnancy that could be observed developing. But Paul's experience was not like that. It was abnormal; it was sudden; it was very precipitous and unexpected.

That may account for the fact that Paul had a difficult time in his early Christian life. When somebody is prematurely born he does not just leap out and handle life like a normal baby. He is cared for specially; he is nurtured in private; he is protected from exposure to danger and germs and it is a long time before he begins to function normally. And this was the case with Paul.

He was born again on the Damascus road, but it was such a sudden, precipitous thing it took a long time for him to adjust his thinking and get it in line with this fantastic event that had occurred. That is why he spent three years in Damascus and Arabia and another seven years in his home town of Tarsus before he got it all together and felt he was ready to begin his great ministry of teaching and preaching all around the world. The Spirit of God led Barnabus to go down to Tarsus and find him ten years later, then Paul began his great worldwide ministry.

In Verses 9-10, we have his evaluation of that ministry. He says:

For I am the least of the apostles, unfit 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 was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me. {1 Cor 15:9-10 RSV}

It is astonishing to me to hear people sometimes accuse the Apostle Paul of being conceited. But anybody who draws that conclusion has never really listened to what Paul has to say about himself. Here he is giving us what he thought were his natural qualifications for his work as an apostle, and he says they are zero, absolutely zip -- and less than that! "I am the least of the apostles," he says, "because the twelve, the ones our Lord called, believed when they heard, but I persecuted the church. Not only did I not believe, I arrogantly and defiantly opposed God," he says. He saw himself as having forfeited every possible right to be an apostle. But his spiritual qualifications overcame, because, he said, "nevertheless I am what I am."

And he knew what he was. He was by this time a well-known apostle, in some ways the leader of the apostolic band, to whom the other apostles looked oftentimes for support and even guidance. He was the most remarkable missionary that has ever appeared on the earth, and he had already spent years in preaching the Word of God in the most difficult places throughout the earth. Now, he says, how could somebody who had no qualifications achieve something like that? His answer is three times stated, "The grace of God which is with me." It is not him, he says, it is the grace of God that does it.

Surely he is referring here to what he regarded without doubt as the greatest truth that is in the gospel. It is the fact that the risen, ascended Lord has found a way by which he can come and live in a human heart, in an individual life, in any scene, in any age, in any generation, and reproduce his character and his life through the ordinary, natural things that a human being does. There is the grace of God. It sets aside all the folly, all the failure, all the weakness, and nevertheless uses us, in simple but effective ways, wherever we are. That is Paul's explanation of his ministry.

I hope that encourages many hearts because many of us feel that we have lost every right to be used of God. We have fouled up our lives, and messed up everything, so how can God use us?

Well, Paul is the great encouragement, isn't he? He who had been the persecutor of the church, and the most ardent enemy of the faith was now the greatest apostle of all, and God was using him everywhere around the earth. Wherever this great apostle went he found whole cities blanketed with despair, people living in anger and hostility with one another, bound with superstition, filled with fears, engaged in the most degrading practices, and destroying themselves with sexual looseness on every side. Here he would begin in simple ways, with the normal contacts he had, to tell them the truth about Jesus. As they would believe, one by one, a believing community would spring up, and their lives would be so different, so glowing, so loving, that word would spread throughout the city, and other people would come and hear. Gradually a whole community would be stirred and changed. City after city began to be changed like that until, within the course of a few decades in the 1st century, the whole Roman world was drastically altered by the power of a risen Lord.

No wonder Paul gloried in the resurrection of Jesus!

And this is what we ought to glory in. We are not turned loose as Christians in this day and age to mobilize all our best human resources, and do what we can for God. We are filled with a risen Christ who is ready to release through us, in terms of our experience, old or young alike, his quiet power to transform humanity from within. That is what brings about fantastic changes in society and social structures as the gospel does its work.

Paul now sums this all up in Verse 11. He says:

Whether then it was I or they, [that is, I or the other apostles] so we preach and so you believed. {1 Cor 15:11 RSV}

It did not make any difference which apostle preached the gospel, it was always the same gospel. There is no difference between Paul's gospel and Peter's gospel. Peter preached to the Jews and Paul went to the Gentiles, but the gospel was the same; the good news was absolutely the same.

Paul, then, puts his finger on the difference between believing the eye witnesses concerning the resurrection of Jesus and believing eye witnesses about any other human event, including the existence of Big Foot or anything else. Do you know what the difference is? Well, when you believe the eye witnesses concerning Big Foot you just believe there is such an animal. He does exist; people have seen him; but that does not give you any access at all to him. You have not seen him; you cannot lay hold of the power and the strength and the cunning of these creatures by your belief. But when you believe in Jesus, something happens. He makes himself known to you; you can receive him. That is the great difference.

This is what has made the change in these Corinthian believers. As Paul says, he preached the gospel but they received it. And when you receive Jesus, changes begin to occur. John tells us, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God," {John 1:12 KJV}. That fundamental change occurs when you receive Jesus.

It has been fifty years now since, as a boy of eleven, I knelt at a Methodist altar in a rough camp meeting in North Dakota and received Jesus as Lord. I still remember clearly how I felt at that moment, and the changes that occurred in my heart immediately following that event. They began to fade after a while, and without adequate nurture I drifted back into a relationship in which many would have thought nothing had happened. But I knew something had, and I could never really be the same again. In my early 20's, when I really returned and began to walk with the Lord, I found that the risen Lord was still present and still making changes in me. He still had power to alter my affections, my desires, my wants, and to supply me with strength and grace to say and do what I ought to do, and to stop me from doing things that I should not do.

That has grown through the years since, and I can bear testimony that Jesus Christ is real. He is not some distant God in some far-off place in space watching us poor, struggling mortals down here. He is real. He is alive. He has confirmed the witness to his resurrection by imparting to my heart and to thousands like me -- and hundreds here -- eternal life. That becomes the ultimate testimony of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. The existence of the church through all these centuries could never have been brought about had he not risen from the dead.

We have, therefore, a risen Lord. I leave you with that truth stirring your heart this morning, as it stirs mine, to realize again that this is the power of the church -- not our feeble efforts for him, but his mighty efforts through us in the simple way we live our lives today.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for reminding us afresh of this mighty truth. Grant to us that, in this 20th century hour, we may join with our brothers and sisters from the 1st century and bear a powerful witness for our risen Lord by the change in the way we think and the way we act and the way we live and the way we love. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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