

Witnesses of the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

We are here this morning to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ and what it means for us as Christians. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection all go together as critically important aspects of Jesus' overall work of salvation on earth, and we can't single one out and say it's more important than the others, but each is unique in its own way, and since it's Easter, we focus on the importance of the resurrection.

The Apostle Paul wrote about the importance of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 and he mentions several eye witnesses who actually saw him: *"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."*

Many people saw Jesus after he rose from the dead and it had a powerful impact on their lives. I want us to go back to those days and think about what it would have been like to be one of them. How did the resurrection change their lives? We're going to hear three eye-witness accounts from actual people whose lives were changed by encountering the risen Christ. And though these stories are fictional, they are based on real people, what's recorded in the Bible and known about that time and culture. They'll help us to connect with how important the resurrection was back then, and how important it is for our lives today.

Cornelius the Centurion (#1)

I didn't know Jesus until the day of his execution. We Romans don't get too wrapped up in Jewish affairs unless they start to cause problems. But that day it was impossible not to notice. Most criminals die with no one around, but Jesus caused a major uproar. His own people hated him so much that they lined the streets to Golgotha. They jeered him and laughed, they kicked and spat. Sometimes I could barely hold them off so he could get by.

They followed all the way up the hill – wanted to see him die. We soldiers just did our jobs – some tended the crowd while others took to the crosses. There were three set to die that day – two criminals and Jesus. I was the centurion on duty and watched while they nailed him to the tree. He said, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” Most people curse us in hatred, but not him. He took the nails and asked for our forgiveness. That’s the first thing that got to me.

We raised him up with the other two and began the long wait. It can take days sometimes – a terrible way to die. The crowd was relentless – the Jewish leaders with the robes came all the way up and taunted him: “Come down from the cross if you’re the Son of God. He saves others but can’t save himself.” They really hated him. Even the thief hanging on one side cursed him in pain. But Jesus never opened his mouth. He never cursed. He never shouted. In fact he spoke kindly to the thief on his left – reassuring words to give him peace. It was amazing.

At some point about midday the strangest thing happened. The sky turned real dark, like before a bad storm, only there wasn’t really a storm. It stayed like that a few hours. Later on I could tell he was really struggling. Gasping for breath he cried out “Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit.” And within seconds he died.

His body no more than went limp when the ground beneath us started to shake. It shook with such force that rocks around started to break. At that point we’d had enough, it was time to get out of there. I had the men break the legs of the other two, but Jesus was already dead. One of the guys stuck him with a spear, just to make sure.

Jesus got into my head that day. He was so different than anyone else, and with all the crazy stuff going on it was then that I knew: truly he must be the Son of God.

But the Son of God was dead, and I didn’t know what to do with that. I thought about it all night and early the next morning I was called to my post – me and some of my men were assigned to the grave where they laid him. Seemed strange with a huge stone already there, but the Jews were afraid – didn’t want the disciples to steal him and say that he rose from the dead.

So we sat through the day, taking shifts while the others slept. I was on duty, then off, then back on again for the night. And I'm telling you, no disciples showed up, but something did happen I'll never forget. Near the end of my shift, as the darkness was starting to lift, the ground shook again – like the day at Golgotha – a bright light flashed in my eyes and I was stunned. I don't know what happened, but when I came to again I looked and that stone had been rolled away. The grave was wide open. I went over and looked and his body was gone.

That's when I started to believe. Nothing could explain what had happened other than what really did happen – Jesus rose from the dead. The soldiers got paid to say his body was stolen, but I knew that wasn't true. They must have seen that in me because the next day I was reassigned to Caesarea. I think they wanted me out of there.

I turned to the God of the Jews in those days, but it wasn't until the visit from Peter that I got the whole story. Jesus really did raise from the dead – Peter had seen him himself. He died on that cross because of our sins but rose back to life again to continue his work. Through trusting in him our sins are forgiven and that's what I did. That's who I am. Now I'm a soldier for Jesus and I've committed my life to him and his kingdom. He saved me and now I want to spread the good news and lead people to him.

Mary of Magdalene (#2)

Life was over for me before I met Jesus. I was alive, but I wasn't living anymore. Poverty and prostitution in Magdala had de-humanized me to the point where I had nothing to live for. I was lost and in my desperation was tormented by evil spirits that attacked and condemned me. Night after night, my life was a living hell.

But then Jesus came. I don't remember how I got near him, but I did, and he saw me. He saw right through my hardened exterior and knew the misery in my soul. And he rescued me – right then and there. With a word he commanded the spirits and they left me. It was an amazing experience. It was like I could see for the first time. Like chains had been broken. My darkness turned to light and I had hope and a new reason to live – to know him and learn from him and spread his kingdom.

So I began to follow him. I walked with him and his disciples and I listened to what he had to say. I watched what he did among the people, how he healed with compassion and taught with authority. He was the most amazing man I ever met. Far different than the other Rabbi's and teachers of the Law. What he said had substance and meaning and revealed the true heart of God. He softened my hard heart so I could love again.

Then came the night that was terrifying. Jesus was arrested in the garden and put before an angry Sanhedrin that was intent on only one thing – putting him to death. And it worked. They said he was guilty of blasphemy and convinced the Romans to kill him by nailing him to a cross. It was a nightmare. I never felt so sick to my stomach as I did that day. How could that happen to him? He was so kind and good. So honest and truthful. So full of compassion and life. But they killed him. They violently scourged him and nailed him to a cross, and he died. I never felt so crushed in all my life. So much hope that was shattered so quickly. And we wondered if everything had been a dream. Could it be that he wasn't really the Messiah?

But everything changed just a couple days later. On the day after Sabbath I went with some friends – we went to the tomb where they laid him. Our plan was treat his body with spices, only when we got there his body was gone. At first we were filled with dismay wondering why anyone would steal his body, but then an amazing thing happened – an angel appeared – an extraordinary being full of light, and told us the good news: he had risen. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” it said.

The others ran ahead to tell the disciples, but I was frozen in place – trembling and crying. What could this mean?

I thought he was the gardener at first. We talked for a little while, but I didn't recognize his voice. But then I heard the sweetest thing I've ever heard: “Mary...” he said. He called me by name – and I knew it was him. I fell to my knees with trembling.

It was such an amazing experience – one that changed me forever. After I saw him everything started to fall into place – things he said that we didn't understand finally made sense. He had to die to pay for our sins. That's why he came into the

world. But once that was complete, it was finished and he came back to life. He called us to continue his mission. He would ascend into heaven, but would be with us in Spirit, giving us everything we'd need. That's my purpose in life now – so much more than before. To live for him and his kingdom – this is true joy and I'll never go back.

Paul the Apostle (#3)

I don't know where to begin – there's so much to tell. But I'll try to keep it brief. I was a Hebrew of Hebrews – a man zealous for the faith. An upcoming Pharisee with a spotless record. I hated the Christians, thought they were enemies of faith. Oh how I wish I knew sooner...

I was the one standing by when they put Stephen to death. I was in charge of the eradication strategy in Jerusalem – planned much of it myself. Our goal was to snuff out all the Christians and put an end to the spread. I didn't know then what I was doing or how futile it was. Gamaliel was right when he told us: "Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" If only I'd listened.

I put so many in prison and the rest either fled or went into hiding. I thought the problem was solved – at least in Jerusalem. So I reached out beyond. That's what led to my first encounter with Christ. I was on the road to Damascus when he interrupted my trip – knocked me right to the ground. The rest of my company couldn't see him or hear him, but I did... I can still hear it now. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" It cut right to my heart. Jesus was supposed to be dead. I saw him dead on the cross. I heard the rumors that he had risen again, but those couldn't be true. But there he was on that road, talking directly to me. Undeniable. I could hear him loud and clear, but I couldn't see because all I saw was a bright light from heaven and I was blind – like scales on my eyes.

The resurrected Christ appeared to me and it ruined me forever – ruined me for who I was that is. From then on, whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain him.

He showed me great mercy I didn't deserve – me, the chief of sinners, for I persecuted his church! I should have suffered condemnation for what I did, but he chose me and saved me and appointed me as a witness to the Gentiles. What a privilege! Fruitful ministry in the most unreached places. Because he lives, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain! And I'll never go back. Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Closing:

Encountering the risen Christ had a profound impact on each person's life. It firmly planted them in the faith – they saw that Jesus was who he said he was and they believed what he taught them. Their faith was immovable, even through much suffering and hardship. Encountering Christ also produced a powerful hope in them – not a hopeful wishing that something might take place, but a joyful assurance and confidence in knowing what will come to pass. Life was difficult for them as Christians, but they knew that there would be a wonderful reward when Christ returned and that hope sustained them throughout their lives on earth.

And finally, encountering the risen Christ produced a love in them for God and other people. Not just a fond affection that we commonly associate with feelings of love, but a willingness to serve others and make sacrifices that would honor the Lord and point others to him. Christ poured his love in them by his Spirit and that love overflowed to others. Faith, hope, and love.

Paul wrote this in 2 Corinthians 5:17-21: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”*¹⁸ *All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;*¹⁹ *that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*²⁰ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*²¹ *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

There are many of us today who have encountered the risen Christ in our lives as well – not in the same way as they did back then, but a spiritual encounter that's undeniable and just as powerful as it was back then. That encounter with Christ

has changed us. And because he lives we also have experienced faith, hope, and love. I remember when it happened to me – I was 14 years old at a church service in Willmar, MN. I'd gone to church my whole life, but it wasn't until that day that my life changed forever. I encountered Christ in my heart – I didn't see him or hear him, but I felt his presence in me and something changed. I felt sorry for my sins and I wanted to live for him. I saw what he did for me on the cross and I truly believed.

There's a song by Bill Gaither that goes like this: "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all fear is gone. Because I know He holds the future. And life is worth a living just because He lives."

Maybe you're here this morning and you feel an emptiness inside. You don't have the faith, hope, and love that I've described. Life has weighed you down. All the brokenness, failures, and disfunction. All the mistakes you've made and wrong you've done has weighed you down. You don't have faith, hope, and love, but I want you to know that you can. You can, because Jesus is alive.

Jesus came to this world and died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. But on the third day he rose from the dead, came out of that grave, and lives today. He rose from the dead to give new life to all who will call on him. Will you put your faith in him today?

He invites anyone to trust in him for the forgiveness of your sins and receive eternal life. He will bring healing and wholeness. He will give you a new life and purpose. You'll become part of his family and join in spreading his kingdom on earth. If you'd like to give your life to Jesus there isn't a magic formula or hoop to jump through, just call out to him in your heart. Surrender to him. Let him come into your life and fill you with hope.

We want to know when that happens so we can rejoice and help you get connected to a church family so you can learn and grow, whether that's here or somewhere else. So talk to me or one of the other people you've seen up here today to let us know.