

Why Christianity Has Appearances

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Scripture Reading

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Cor 15:12-19 NIV)

EXPERIENCING THE RISEN JESUS

In the last two weeks, we have been taking a look at these verses at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15. Paul says I passed on to you matters of “first importance.” And what are they? Well, he says first of all that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures. We talked about that in a lesson titled “Why Christianity has a cross.” Then Paul says, “he was buried and he rose again, according to the Scriptures.” We dove into that teaching last week in a lesson titled “Why Christianity has a resurrection.” And we spend considerable time emphasizing the empty tomb. The *empty* tomb. I am a firm believer that the body which went into the grave came out of the grave. And we tend to talk about that event as “the empty tomb.” It’s quite common to see a bumper stick with the slogan, “saved by the empty tomb.”

But the New Testament doesn’t put a lot of emphasis on the “empty tomb.” In fact, that only led to fear and panic, my friend Matthew Love (who preaches for the Beebe Church of Christ in Beebe) makes a poignant observation by contrasting the popular emphasis on “the empty tomb” with the New Testament emphasis on an encounter with the risen Christ. The fact that Jesus rose bodily from the dead—leaving behind an empty tomb—is true and crucial for the Christian story. Indeed, it is necessary for any true encounter with a risen Lord. But read the accounts again. What does experiencing

“the empty tomb” produce? For the first followers of Jesus, it immediately produces bewilderment, fear, and hiding behind locked doors. For this reason, the absence of a body in a hollowed out tomb is not a “stand alone” teaching at the heart of the Christian faith.

Paul mentions the tomb in passing. It’s there. It’s part of the “first importance” teaching. But it wasn’t the empty tomb that produced hope in the heart of believers; it was their encounter with the risen Christ. The sight of the empty tomb brought fear and panic; but visions or appearances of Jesus brought hope and joy.

And if you notice, Paul is still listing matters of “first importance” when he said not only that Jesus died, and was buried, and was raised, but that he was *seen*. Witnessed. Experienced.

Matthew Love writes these words:

If the empty tomb changes nothing, then what does? The answer: meeting the resurrected Lord. It’s only then in the Gospels that the disciples’ lives are transformed. Doubt persists (Matt. 28:17), but without encountering the risen Christ there is no transformation...

The issue today is not whether one knows the tomb is empty, but whether one has met the resurrected Lord. The resurrection is not solely about the absence of death found in the empty tomb, but the presence of life. The empty tomb simply leaves space for this living Lord.¹

If you were raised like I was, you might find language about “meeting Jesus,” or “having a personal experience” with Christ sounds peculiar. What would that even mean? But we need to do justice to the Biblical text first, then talk about what it means for us to today. The first thing I want us to notice is that “having a personal experience with Jesus Christ” formed the basis of the first Christian witness. Listen to the experiential language with which John begins his first letter:

From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in—we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we’re telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us. We saw it, we heard it, and now we’re telling you so you can experience it along with us, this experience of communion with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3 MSG).

¹ Matthew Love, “The Empty Tomb Changes Nothing.” May 18, 2017. Beebe Church of Christ bulletin <http://www.beebechurch.net/articles/the-empty-tomb-changes-nothing>

“We didn’t follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power,” claims an early witness; instead, “we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16 NIV). In an earlier letter, Peter is described as “a witness of Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet 5:1). On Pentecost day, Peter tells the crowd experiencing the inbreaking of God’s Spirit that “God raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it” (Acts 2:32; see also 3:15; 5:32). Early Christian writings emphasized not only that Christ “gave himself as a ransom for all people,” but that “this has now been witnessed to at the proper time” (1 Tim 2:6 NIV). When Christ called Paul to be an apostle, he was charged to serve as a witness not only to past events but also *present* and *future* experiences of *Christ*: “I am Jesus...I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and a witness of what you have seen *and will see of me*” (Acts 26:15-16 NIV).

Now let’s make one thing clear: there was certainly something “unique” and “special” about being an eyewitness. Peter told Cornelius “we are witnesses of everything he did” in his earthly ministry; however “he was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (Acts 10:39-41 NIV).

This sense of personal encounter, retained vividly in their memory and shared experiences, formed the heart of their early witness to the truth and power of the gospel.

Jesus knew the power of personal encounter. After rising from the grave, Jesus made several stops before returning to the Father. He made personal appearances to his followers, often sharing a meal as a way of reminding them of his presence, care, and protection. When Jesus finds the hurting, doubting, struggling disciples, he comes to them. To Thomas and the rest of the apostles, Jesus ignores the “keep out” sign hanging on the locked door, and appears among them, with scars and wounds to satisfy their lingering doubts. Peter needed one last chance to say “I’m sorry,” when Jesus called him over for breakfast. A disciple named Clopus needs to see Jesus; so Jesus walks beside him, and stays for dinner. Whether like Peter in the early morn, Thomas at noon, or Clopus in the evening, Jesus makes himself known to troubled hearts.

And these encounters made a lasting impact. My favorite painting of the resurrection appearances is that of Caravaggio entitled “The Incredulity of St. Thomas.” There is Thomas, with finger piercing Jesus’ side. But his eyes tell the story. They are wide with shock, wonder, amazement, and just a hint of joyful excitement. You can almost hear him say with a faint whisper: “It’s...the Lord!”

Two followers who experience the risen Christ describe the event as having “our hearts burning within us” (Luke 24:32 NIV), a moving phrase that speaks to the passion and

persuasion involved in an encounter with the living Christ. The early Christians believed that Jesus would be “with them always” (Matthew 28:20), and this sense of personal encounter, retained vividly in their memory and shared experiences, formed the heart of their early witness to the truth and power of the gospel.

And you and I hear this and...perhaps...begin to feel, well, disenfranchised. I mean “I haven’t heard his audible voice,” and “I haven’t been visited by Jesus in my living room.” But if you ever feel less fortunate, less connected, and less assured than those first followers of Christ...think again.

It’s important to note that, on several occasions, Paul identifies God’s Holy Spirit as “the spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9; Phil 1:19). When God’s church—his holy temple—is assembled together, “the power of the Lord Jesus is present” (1 Cor 5:4) writes Paul. And do not forget that Jesus told his followers that when the Spirit comes, to “live with you and...be in you,” it is then that “I will come to you;” for those who receive God’s Holy Spirit, both Jesus and the Father will “come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:17-18, 23 NIV). This means that by having God’s Holy Spirit—filled and surrounded by God’s empowering presence—we are not less fortunate than the first disciples; in this way we, too, experience the presence and power of Jesus.

Some of you may be able to speak of big experiences; bone-chilling encounters. But I tend to think of the little things.

I experience the presence and power of Jesus when I see someone surrender their life in baptism and witness a profound event of baptism. I experience the presence and power of Jesus when two or three of my brothers and sisters put their arms around me and pray for me in the middle of my troubles. I experience the presence and power of Jesus when a brother in Christ shows up at my doorstep with a cup of cold water in my hour of need. I experience the presence and power of Jesus when I join with others in doing good, and help someone learn to read, or get a hot meal for the first time in a long time, or help them fight an injustice, or introduce them to the Gospel. The Spirit is the spirit of Jesus; and doing spiritual things with spiritual people is a way to encounter and experience the living Jesus. We don’t serve a Savior who simply a name in a history book; we serve a living, loving, Lord, who is not only alive and well, but lives in our hearts by faith, and who we regularly encounter in the preached word, in the bread and the juice, in our prayers, in our singing, in our fellowship, in our good deeds, and in the moments of life when its so obvious that God is reminding us of his power and control.

This is why we need to believe in the presence of God’s Holy Spirit! Listen to the words of Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch:

Without the Holy Spirit, God remains distant, Christ remains in the past, the Gospel remains a dead letter. Without the Spirit, the Church is merely another organization, authority becomes tyranny, mission is only propaganda, the liturgy is a simple remembrance, and Christian life takes on the atmosphere of slavery. But in the Spirit, in an indissoluble synergism, the cosmos is freed and becomes a foreshadowing of the Reign of God, humans struggle against the flesh, and the Risen Christ is already present. The Gospel becomes a vivifying force; the Church echoes the Trinitarian communion; authority is Pentecostal; the liturgy is a memorial and an anticipation; and human activity is divinized.

As Christians, we wear the name of Christ, house the spirit of Christ, walk in the footsteps of Christ, worship and pray in the power of Christ, and live with the assurance of the abiding presence of Christ. Would to God that we all lived in the constant recognition of the powerful presence of Christ in our lives through the promised Holy Spirit! I continue to be moved by John Wesley's autobiographical description of his own awakening to the power and presence of Christ in a quickly recorded journal entry from 1738:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

You don't have to believe you have supernatural abilities to simply catch the thrill of recognizing that we serve a Lord who is alive and walks with us day by day. Be inspired to speak of your life with Christ with the passion usually reserved for letters you send to much less significant others. We are not all wired the same way, and we tell our experiences in different words. *But may we all speak of our experience!* In the water of baptism as we unite with the death of Christ; in receiving the Spirit as we are empowered by the work of Christ; at the communion table as we sup with the risen Christ; in our Christian neighbor as they forgive us when we wrong them or as they hear us confess one to another in the name of Christ; in the conviction that comes from hearing God's word proclaimed in the truth of Christ; in the circle of prayer as an assembled people in the hope of Christ; let us tell of our experience in the way our addictions are broken, our selfishness is lessened, and God's spiritual fruit is brought to full bloom as we yield ourselves to the Spirit of Christ.