

Witnesses

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[0:00] Of the other gospel writers, only John really recalls this appearance in any detail, and he doesn't specifically mention witnesses. But for Luke, this seems to be the main point in verse 48.

! You are witnesses of these things, he says. The disciples must be witnesses. Who else is going to? Why does Luke focus on this particularly?

The difference is, of course, that John in his gospel is coming to an end. He's saying this is the last sign, as it were. The resurrection is the culminating sign. He's finishing his book. But Luke is only halfway through.

He's winding up for the book of Acts, and we'll be looking at the book of Acts a bit later in the summer, I believe. So he's linking these last verses really link the two together.

I think that's why we only have such a short discussion of the ascension right at the end of the gospel, because he's going to pick this up in volume two. In the next episode, as we sometimes see on the TV, when they come to an end, they tell you or give you a brief introduction of what you're going to be in the next one.

[1:16] And I think that's what Luke is doing here. But he focuses on them being witnesses, because he wants to... Because he's going to describe that.

He said that he's told they've got to be witnesses, and he's going to go out and do it. They're going to go out and do it. So as I say, in these final few verses of his gospel, Luke sets the agenda for Acts.

He'll record the apostles putting this commission into action. So I thought before we look into this passage, it's worth thinking a little bit about this idea of witnesses. What are witnesses? What do they do?

Do you like TV cop dramas? Quite key on some of them. I particularly like the ones where forensics are involved. CSI, there were lots and lots of those in the beginning of the first decade of the century, weren't there?

Silent Witness, the British one that's been going for years and years now. There's another one actually, which Brenda and I seem to have missed the first time around, but it's popped up on iPlayer, so we've been binge watching it.

[2:33] It's set in Dundee, and it's called Traces. And the tagline of it is quite interesting. The tagline of the episodes is, The evidence doesn't lie, people do.

Which is very much to the point, I think. So these dramas remind us that there are various kinds of witnesses.

First of all, there are eyewitnesses who actually saw what happened. But even then, some eyewitnesses are more useful than others. One might just say, I saw the woman fall from the balcony.

Okay, well that explains why there's a body on the concrete, but not much more. Did she fall by accident? Did she jump or was she pushed?

More information is needed. Do you want to know, was there anyone else on the balcony? Did the woman fall forwards or backwards?

[3:40] Obviously seeing something like this is traumatic. But the best eyewitnesses remain calm and observant. They should report exactly what they saw, no more and no less.

But there is another point to make about this and that is that eyewitnesses will remember different things. If the eyewitnesses all say, oh we left the pub at 1137 and we got to the park at 1152, you don't think, oh that's remarkable what their memory is.

You think, no this is fake. They've got together and made up a cover story. Eyewitnesses will remember different things and sometimes you have to do a bit of work to get the full picture.

As many lawyers have pointed out, this is exactly what we find in the Gospels and particularly the end of the Gospels. Where we get told from the viewpoint of different eyewitnesses. And you have to think of it actually to put them together.

But that's exactly what we would expect if they are genuine eyewitnesses. I read something recently that a lawyer was saying that if this was fake then they were geniuses.

[4:51] They would have understood quite how they could do it. So we have eyewitnesses and they're important but we need to beware of a made up story.

But then the expert witnesses get involved. There are whole crowds of them aren't there nowadays? Various skills, scenes of the crime officers, forensic pathologists, many kinds of specialists.

The magic boxes, the mass spectrometer that they all seem to have in their labs. Their job is to look beyond the obvious, isn't it? Is to follow the evidence.

Was the court fall the cause of death? Or was she dead actually before she went over the balcony? Were there drugs or alcohol in her blood?

Were there defensive wounds or other evidence of a struggle? Examine the railing closely. Is it scratched or damaged? Is there any blood or other bodily tissue that we can use to get DNA?

[6:08] The more data you have, the more chance to get to the truth. And again, these sort of witnesses have to be careful as well.

Because expert witnesses must be able to explain the significance of their findings to non-technical people. And there have been notorious cases of miscarriage of justice where expert witnesses have failed to do that.

They've given the wrong information either deliberately or because they made a mistake. Because they're experts, people tend to believe them. But they're not infallible.

As they say, the evidence doesn't lie but the peoples can do so sometimes. And then of course you get the investigating officers, don't you?

Police, private investigators, sometimes journalists do this job. In fact, this is the role that Luke sees himself in if you look back to chapter 1 verse 3.

[7:17] He says, I've carefully investigated all this. What's their job?

Their job is to get to the backstory, isn't it? Find out this person's relationships. Who was she? Are there any motives for the crime?

You know, sex, money, power, status, jealousy. These are the reasons that people commit crimes. What was the mental state of the victim? Was she suicidal?

Was there a suicide note anywhere? And if there was a suicide note, is it genuine or is it fake? Even if the death does turn out to be an accident, they still need to find out why it happened, don't they?

The best investigators are eagle-eyed but they also have an insight into human behaviour. They can put the whole story together and make sense of it.

[8:25] So if all these considerations apply when you're investigating a person who should be alive but has been found dead, how much more do they apply when you're investigating a man who should be dead but has been found alive?

Looked at this way, you can see why Luke describes the event in the way he does. As he said, Jesus wants them to be witnesses.

! They're not in a good state, are they? There's a whole lot of adjectives here. They're confused, they're fearful. John tells us, in fact, that the doors were locked against the Jews.

They were startled, frightened, troubled, doubting, even spooked. They think they've seen a ghost. So Jesus starts by trying to ground them.

Peace be with you. Why are you troubled? Why do doubts arrange in your mind? So, guys, take a deep breath, calm down. Take it slowly.

[9:32] Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself. Touch me and see. A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.

So they do a forensic examination, as it were. He really has a solid body, not an apparition. And yet, at the same time, this body is not just the old one resuscitated.

He seems to have got back from Emmaus and got in via a locked door. Jesus' resurrection body has new powers. It's not just the old one recycled.

And yet it is solid. He can eat fish, verse 43. They will all testify to that. The resurrection is genuine, not simply wishful thinking.

Just as well, isn't it? Christianity really doesn't make any sense. We've already read this passage once, well, twice today, I think, but don't do any harm to read it again.

[10:38] 1 Corinthians 15. 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 found to be false witnesses about God. 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.

This is crucial. The resurrection is, of course, crucial. There have always been people who say, oh, the resurrection didn't happen.

Even those who claim to be Christian teachers say the resurrection didn't happen, just that the disciples felt he'd been raised or something like that. But it makes no sense. Christianity just doesn't make sense.

It didn't make sense in Paul's time, and it doesn't make sense now. And so the disciples have a sort of flip of mood, don't they?

[11:47] Joy and amazement, verse 41. Because of joy and amazement, but because of joy and amazement, what? They still did not believe. Having been sort of depressed and down and spooked, they're now thinking, this is too good to be true.

And if it's too good to be true, it probably is. It probably isn't true. They're still not really believing. Jesus still has to ground them.

The best witnesses are calm and rational. So, people can be amazed by miracles and things, but that's not really testifying to the grace of the resurrection.

The best witnesses, as I say, are calm and rational. So he eats some fish, verse 43, aged in their presence. That seems to have finally grounded them.

They are now thinking rationally about what's going on. But still, however calm and rational the witnesses appear, no one is going to believe this unless they can put it into a context that makes sense, are they?

[13:17] I mean, you wouldn't, would you? Somebody just turned up and said, my friend has just been raised from the dead. You'd say, don't be ridiculous. Of course you would. It wouldn't make any sense. So it has to make sense in the context.

So what is the backstory? They need to understand in verse 45 that all the scriptures are pointing to this pivotal event. Verse 44.

This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled. It is written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms.

Luke doesn't spread out all the detail here. He just says, Jesus spelt it out to them. It must have taken several hours, I should think.

Daniel has given us a few bits of it this morning and last week. It could take a fair bit of study, I should think, to get the whole thing.

[14:21] But they did it. They needed to do it. And so when Peter is asked to explain what is happening in Acts 2, when he says that people seem to be getting rather excited, what's going on, he says, they're not drunk as you suppose.

It's only nine in the morning. This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Peter seems to have learned his lesson well.

Joel is not one of the more well-known prophets, I guess. But he's found the relevant bit. And of course, it is interesting what he actually says when we read in Luke 24 verse 46.

This is what is written. The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. And repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

Well, hang on a minute. That's not what is written, is it? That's not a direct quotation from anywhere. What he's saying, of course, is the whole of the Old Testament scriptures point to this event.

[15:45] So when Zechariah says that in one day, God will remove the sins from the people, that was pointing to this event. Isaiah says that he was stricken for our sins.

That was pointing to this event. He goes on to say he will remember, he will have his descendants. He was killed. It implies that he has to be resurrected in Isaiah, doesn't it?

Because he will know his descendants, it says. Know his children. He's bringing it together.

Actually, I looked up what the word understand in verse 45 literally, is literally in the Greek.

And it literally means to bring together. It means to put it all together. I mean, it does have the implication of understanding it, but understanding it in the sense of putting all the bits together and suddenly it makes sense.

So they've calmed down. They've done the forensics. They've got the backstory and the context.

[16:54] They're nearly ready to be effective witnesses, verse 48. But Jesus realises that they still need one more thing. They're going to need power from above.

And he tells them in verse 49 to wait until you have power from above. But when this, it's interesting that when this power does come in Acts 2, it comes in the form of language, doesn't it?

You might have expected some spectacular sign calling down fire from heaven or something like that. But it's language. They're empowered to speak. And particularly, they're empowered to speak of the resurrection.

Of course, the apostles did perform signs, marks of the apostles, and a few of them are recorded in Acts. But they were always secondary. Their gospel focus was always the message.

Jesus himself had said, A wicked and adulterous generation asked for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. And the resurrection, of course, is the sign of the prophet Jonah as he was spit out from the fish on the third day.

[18:14] He had been effectively dead, not actually literally dead, but effectively dead, and was brought back to life when the fish spat him out onto the beach.

That's the only sign that is absolutely crucial, the resurrection itself. And this is what the gospel bears witness to. So, first of all, we could perhaps think of ourselves as being the jury.

We're not eyewitnesses, of course, but then neither actually was Luke. He doesn't come in personally in the story until about halfway through Acts. So we assume he probably wasn't present at this event.

But he has carefully investigated. He's done a lot of the legwork for us. The Jewish authorities, what are the cases that are put forward?

The Jewish authorities claim that the disciples stole the body. Which is interesting in itself, because if they had the body, all they'd have to do was produce it, and the whole case would collapse.

[19:26] If you can actually demonstrate that this woman is not dead after all, then the whole case collapses. In this case, it's the other way around. If you can prove that Jesus is dead after all, then the whole case collapses.

But they couldn't do it. The only possible, plausible case they could put at all was that the disciples had stolen the body. So as a juror, you need to consider the evidence carefully and rationally.

Yeah, Angela's here, you're going to be on a jury soon, aren't you? I've done it once a while ago.

You need to be rational about the evidence, not get too emotional about it.

Just sit down and see, does this really make sense? There's of course the dreaded confirmation bias that statisticians go on about.

The fact that we always tend to accept the evidence that supports our preconceived ideas. You have to beware of that. Keep an open mind.

[20:37] That applies of course whatever side of the debate you are. We need to try and avoid that and keep an open mind and be rational about

it.

What does the evidence actually say? Well, as far as Luke's concerned, the resurrection is the only explanation that makes any sense. If you're here this evening, then perhaps you'll agree with that or at least are prepared to consider that.

Consider that. But that seems to me also, and it's seemed to many people over the years, that this is the only, and this is what the apostles would testify to.

This is the only explanation for this facts that make any sense, is that Jesus really was resurrected. But of course we can't just be jurors, can we?

Because all the eyewitnesses are now dead. The juror delivers the verdict and then goes home and forgets about the trial.

[21:50] But we can't do that. If we're convinced the apostles have a valid case, we can't do that. We have to become disciples firstly ourselves. And once we become disciples, we have to become witnesses ourselves.

We need new witnesses for the 21st century. And we need to be like Luke actually, don't we? We need to say, therefore, since I have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you've been taught.

I'm not saying we all have to write a book, but we all have to be able to give an act, to have investigated the facts, and to be able to give an orderly account.

Of course, Luke was actually writing to a sympathetic audience. He writes to Theophilus, and of course theologians argue about whether that's a single person or a church or just a sort of general term for anybody who's any seeker.

I don't think we can answer that question, but it does imply, lover of God, somebody who's sympathetic. But it's not always sympathetic. Peter would later give this advice.

[23:08] In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you, to give a reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect.

Let me just repeat that. Always be prepared. Like the Boy Scouts, you've got to be prepared. Be prepared to do what?

To give an answer. It doesn't say necessarily you have to sort of engineer the question. Sometimes it is a case of giving an answer. Somebody comes along and says, what's this resurrection rubbish? Does it make sense? It doesn't make sense, does it? But you've got to be prepared to answer anyone, whether sympathetic or rude they seem to be. And you have to give a reason.

You can't just say, well I hope it's true. That's not what the Bible means by hope, of course. You have to give a reason for that hope.

[24:14] So, you know, this seems to be the best explanation for these facts. But then comes the interesting bit in the end, Peter says, do this with gentleness and respect.

That's the one thing people can't do nowadays, is it? Everything becomes weaponized. There's this new law in Scotland that, you know, you can't say anything that almost anybody is going to disagree with, or at least some people take it that way.

The police is absolutely swamped with complaints. And probably, I don't know, but probably complaints on both sides. And you get this ridiculous situation now where Christians are suing their employers for discrimination because they've sacked them because they're Christians and things like that.

You can't treat each other with gentleness and respect unless you do it through the Lord Jesus Christ. But that doesn't mean to say we've got to be soppy and woolly. We've got to give a reason for the hope that's in us and to do it with gentleness and respect.

We can only do that, of course, if we understand the reason ourselves. So, I'll hand back to Daniel.

[25:40] We wanted to sing past on the promise. We're having a bit of a Getty Fest today, actually. But we thought it was going to be two different things.