

Eyewitness Talk

Sunday, April 28, 2019

John 20:19-31

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

One night in 1984, a stranger broke into Jennifer Thompson-Cannino's apartment and assaulted her. Thompson-Cannino, then a 22-year-old college student, helped police sketch artists create a composite picture of her attacker. Later, in a photo lineup, she identified Ronald Cotton, a 22-year-old man who looked strikingly like her sketch and who had previous run-ins with the law. She also picked Cotton from a live lineup. Cotton was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

A decade later, DNA tests proved that Cotton was not a match to samples from Thompson-Cannino's assailant. The samples did match the DNA of another convict, Bobby Poole who bragged to a fellow inmate about the attack on Thompson-Cannino. When exonerated, Cotton and Thompson-Cannino co-authored the book "Picking Cotton" (2010) about their experience and advocating reforms to the eyewitness identification procedures. Their story is a classic example of the fragile nature of eyewitness testimony. Their story forces us to ask: how reliable is eyewitness testimony? Can we trust it? Should we trust it?

I raise this issue because the resurrection of Jesus, the primary event upon which Christian's base their faith is entirely based on eyewitness testimony. Without the eyewitness testimony of those who saw Jesus alive after the crucifixion it would be hard to make a case for the resurrection. On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb of Jesus and found it empty. She ran and told the disciples. They didn't believe her and went to see for themselves. Later Mary spoke with Jesus and professed to the disciples, "*I have seen the Lord*" (John 20:18).

In Acts 10, the apostle Peter addressed Gentiles gathered in the home of a centurion named Cornelius. Peter, referring to himself and some fellow believers, said, "*We were witnesses to all that [Jesus] did in Judea and Jerusalem,*" meaning during Jesus' ministry. Then Peter, speaking of Jesus' death and resurrection, said Jesus appeared "*not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses*" (Acts 10:41).

This is one of at least ten references in the book of Acts to eyewitnesses affirming the resurrection of Jesus, and there are verses elsewhere in the New Testament alluding to it as well. The apostle Paul even reported that Jesus appeared to more than 500 believers "*at one time*" (1 Cor. 15:6). Paul encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

But can we trust such eyewitness testimony? In court cases, eyewitness testimony is often a huge problem. A report by the Innocence Project (an organization that uses DNA testing to exonerate those wrongfully convicted of crimes) says that since the introduction of DNA testing in the 1990s, 73 percent of the 239 convictions overturned through DNA testing were based on eyewitness testimony. One-third of these overturned cases rested on the testimony of two or more mistaken eyewitnesses.

There is research showing that 75 percent of false convictions are caused by an inaccurate eyewitness statement. This is attributed to factors such as induced stress, memory decay, and poor eyesight. There is also something known as *eyewitness talk*. When eyewitnesses discuss with other eyewitnesses what they saw, they are likely to change their minds about what they thought they saw based on the recollections of other witnesses.

One survey found that 86 percent of real eyewitnesses claimed to have discussed the event with other witnesses prior to giving testimony. Researchers say that this talking among eyewitnesses can result in the process called "co-witness conformity" where eyewitnesses are influenced into including in their statements things they didn't see.

With all of that in mind, we come to the story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples when Thomas was not present. When Thomas arrives, his colleagues tell him what they saw, but Thomas is not convinced. He's hearing eyewitness talk from no fewer than ten of his friends, all of whom spent a lot of time with Jesus and who should easily be able to identify Jesus. But Thomas is nobody's fool. People don't get up and walk around after they're dead and buried, so the eyewitness testimony, despite its unanimity in claiming Jesus is alive, isn't enough to sway Thomas.

Then, a week later, Thomas finds himself face to face with Jesus and he is invited to touch the nail prints in Jesus' hands and the wound in his side. Thomas blurts out, "*My Lord and my God!*" and Jesus' response almost sounds like a scolding: "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" It's like he's saying, "You should have believed the eyewitness testimony, Thomas. Shame on you."

Traditionally, Thomas is given the nickname "Doubting Thomas" because he requires definitive proof before he makes his statement of faith. I think Thomas' doubts are completely understandable. "Seeing is believing," after all, right? But Jesus seems to be saying: *Believing is seeing*. Certainly, that's how it is for the rest of us who follow Jesus.

Although the New Testament does speak of eyewitnesses, our conviction that Jesus is the Living Lord does not start with eyewitness talk, it starts with faith.

So, perhaps we've misread Jesus' words to Thomas. Perhaps it is not so much a scolding as it is an observation wherein Jesus pronounces a special blessing on those who believe without the eyewitness testimony: "*Blessed* are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (in fact, it reads like a beatitude). In other words, "If you need to have evidence, fine, but you are really blessed if you can believe without proof."

Jesus' statement lets us know that our human need for evidence, testimony, or proof is meaningless in the kingdom of God. What's required for our spiritual lives is faith, which the writer of Hebrews describes as the "*evidence of things not seen*" (11:1). C.S. Lewis understood this. He once remarked that he believed in Christianity just like he believed in the sun: "Not only because I see it," he said, "but because by it I see everything else."

Picking up on Lewis' comment, Brandon Ambrosino, who covers culture and religion for Vox.com, wrote:

"That's how I see Jesus' resurrection; not so much an event I look at, [but] *as an event I look through*. For me, it remains the interpretive key to the entire universe. And though it might seem improbable and primitive, we're all aware that the idea is writ large across both our imaginations and even the cosmos. Each morning, the sun is reborn; each spring, harvests come back to life; after each disappointment, our dashed hopes are reanimated, and soar to even newer heights. For all the death and evil and greed and ugliness of our world, I can't shake the fact that every last atom of this place is pulsing in time with the rhythm of resurrection" (emphasis added).

So, as we gather on this Sunday after Easter, we are not looking for more evidence to confirm that the resurrection of Jesus happened. We are looking to celebrate how the resurrection helps us interpret the world, and to receive from the resurrection both our daily hope and our long-term optimism. Eyewitnesses can be mistaken when they testify to what they saw or think they saw. But sometimes they get it right, and eyewitnesses can help us to grasp the impact of what has happened.

Most of us come to faith based on the testimony of others. Maybe it was the sure faith of a parent or grandparent that persuaded us of the Bible's validity. Maybe it was the witness

of a youth leader or a peer that influenced our faith. Maybe it was the testimony of a teacher or a pastor that strengthened our conviction. If that's how you came to faith, then your belief is based on the belief of someone you trusted.

It's the same with the scriptures. We believe the Gospels are recorded by reliable witnesses who saw and spoke and spent time with Jesus *after* the crucifixion. They were eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ. We have very little hard proof that these things took place as the Bible described them; what we do have is the eyewitness talk of faithful people, and their testimony stands the test of time.

Which is why it is so important for us to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus: if we don't tell the story, who will? If we do not testify to the truth of Christ's Gospel, the world will create its own version of the truth. If we don't share our eyewitness talk about Jesus, then future generations will not have the basis for true and lasting faith.

After his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples, "*Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation*" (Mark 16:15). The truth about Jesus' resurrection is that God is stronger than death, that sin has no power over us anymore, and that we are empowered to live new lives in the service of one another. We are called to witnesses to what we believe to be true: God is good, Jesus saves, and the Holy Spirit is transforming lives. This is good news! Share it with others.

Prayer: Whatever it takes, Lord, decrease the hold that unbelieving fear has over me and increase my boldness to declare the gospel to everyone you put in my path. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Sources:

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