

How Reliable is Your Witness?

Acts 1:12-26 (NIV)

¹² Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. ¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) ¹⁶ and said, "Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ He was one of our number and shared in our ministry." ¹⁸ (With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. ¹⁹ Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ "For," said Peter, "it is written in the Book of Psalms: " 'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' and, " 'May another take his place of leadership.' ²¹ Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, ²² beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection." ²³ So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." ²⁶ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

Eyewitnesses are still the main lead in investigations. Courts still view them as trusted information, crucial in solving cases and in rendering verdicts. At the same time, though, don't you feel an undercurrent that eyewitnesses aren't reliable? I mean, they can be bought, coerced, or blackmailed into lying, even though they swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We know that the right questions can lead people to conclusions that aren't in line with what happened. We know that memories are faulty, even if they aren't trying to distort the facts.

So, when should we trust eyewitnesses? What makes for a reliable eyewitness? Is their story reasonable? Does it make sense? I mean, we are going to quickly discard the person who tells us that Mickey Mouse lives in their basement because that's a fictitious cartoon character. How well does their testimony hold up to scrutiny and cross-examination? When you press them on the details do they get all nervous and seem like they don't have the information or are creating it on the spot? Can we corroborate this with video surveillance or photos? But then again those forms of evidence can be forged, falsified.

Even after passing a litany of tests, there are times when we still don't believe an eyewitness. This might be because their experience goes against anything we have ever experienced or seen. Sometimes we think that their experience is biased and that they have something to gain with their testimony, whether it's notoriety, fame, money, or just attention. Other times we don't believe the eyewitness because we don't want it to be true.

Last week, Job declared boldly that he knew that his Redeemer lived. Yet, he never saw Jesus rise from the dead. We weren't there either. Did that actually happen? This event came under scrutiny pretty much as soon as it happened. There were witnesses, Roman soldiers, who testified that Jesus' disciples had stolen his body from the tomb while they were asleep... but none of them actually saw the stealing take place. That's not an eyewitness account. At best, it's speculation as to how this empty tomb happened, but is more conjecture and, honestly, slander. And it's pretty hard to imagine that of the entire cadre of highly trained soldiers none of them woke up at the noise of a giant stone being rolled away. Plus, this testimony would have been verified if they had found Jesus' dead body, but no one ever has. There's the swoon theory that Jesus didn't die but simply passed out. However, that would mean that these Roman soldiers who were trained in effective killing couldn't actually tell when a man is dead and that this Jesus who was beaten within an inch of his life would be strong enough two days later to get himself out of a tomb with a heavy stone in front of it and did not retain the wounds from the crucifixion other than the scars of the nails and the cut of the spear. Some say that it was a mass hallucination, that his followers saw Jesus because they really wanted to see him. But they genuinely thought Jesus was dead and not coming back, fearing that they would be killed too. Also, hundreds of people said they witnessed the resurrected Christ at different times and different places, even once with more than 500 people at one time. Since hallucinations happen in an individual's mind, there's no way that hallucinations can be shared. Others say that the resurrection is simply a myth, a made-up story. Why? Because dead people don't come back to life, and religious people lie for their own ends.

Do you doubt that Jesus was raised from the dead within three days of dying on the cross? Is it not even full-blown skepticism but just a small little voice in the back of your head that says that this might not be true. Maybe this never happened because I've never seen a dead person come back to life. Maybe this is just a fairy tale, wishful thinking from well-meaning people who want something to put their hope in, some way to make sense of this world and all its awfulness.

I could tell you that God says it happened, so it happened. End of story. But that's not all that God gives us to confirm that Jesus actually rose from the dead and put our doubts to death. He gave us eyewitnesses. He gave us the 11 remaining apostles, chosen by Jesus himself: "Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James." (verse 13) They came from all sorts of different backgrounds and experiences. Some had been outcasts while others were pretty typical. Some were blue collar workers while others were white collar workers. Some vehemently opposed the government while others had worked for the government. They were not uniform in their thinking, but they all had accepted that Jesus died and were afraid because of it. They thought that they were next. Peter had shamefully denied even knowing Jesus to a slave girl. Thomas wouldn't believe 10+ eyewitnesses who said that they had seen the risen Jesus, testimonies from people he had known and served with for 3 years. Yet, at this point, every single one of them testified that Jesus died on the cross and that they saw him alive, fully restored. They stood by this story without changing it or adding details. And what did they get for it? Poverty. Shipwrecks. Persecution. Floggings. Imprisonment. Execution.

Then you have the women, women who supported Jesus during his ministry out of their own means, maybe some of the wives of the apostles. Again, they came a diversity of backgrounds, high and low social standings, ones who had personally experienced miracles from Jesus like Mary Magdalene who had 7 demons driven from her. Many, if not all, had seen Jesus crucified and buried. They were the first ones to see Jesus raised from the dead. Even more incredible that their testimony was preserved because first century Jewish culture assumed that the testimony of women was inadmissible in court. (Yep, different time and different culture).

Mary, Jesus' mother, was also there. She had the angel Gabriel appear to her announcing this special birth. She knew that she was a virgin and yet was pregnant. She had seen Jesus from birth to death, was there at the cross. And now she had seen her boy, who more importantly was her God, alive, raised from the dead. She was still there, serving to verify that Jesus, her son, is alive!

Then there were Jesus' brothers, most likely the subsequent children of Mary and Joseph. At least 4 of them are listed in the Bible along with sisters. Why do they matter? Because they didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah before this time. Now they have seen Jesus raised from the dead. Now they believe that he is who he said he was. They were skeptical of Jesus their whole lives. Now they are convinced.

That's not even all of the witnesses. There are others who saw Jesus through his ministry and saw him alive after his death. At least two more are listed here with Barsabbas and Matthias. And we have a group of 120 for this meeting to ensure that they would have a reliable eyewitness continue with the apostles, bringing them back to the number 12. And Luke, the author of the book of Acts, who wrote all this down, is a doctor, a man of science, a man who investigated all of this thoroughly so that we would have certainty over who Jesus is, what he had done, and that he indeed was raised from the dead.

God gives us all these various and correlating eyewitnesses so that we can be assured that Jesus coming back to life is not just some religious propaganda to make us feel better about our lives and having this faith. We have the one real historically attested to person who claimed to be God, died, and then was brought back to life and still lives. This means that just as we heard Jesus say to the disciples in the upper room, peace is yours. Your sins are forgiven. Go tell others that you know that your sins and the sins of everyone in the whole world is paid for because Jesus died for them and came back to life guaranteeing that it actually happened. God gave us these eyewitnesses so that we would have fellowship with God, assured that the dividing factor of sin is removed. Nothing bars us from him and being with him forever. This is the life God planned for us, wants us to have. Jesus' resurrection proves it. The eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection claim this so that our joy, their joy, this joy of being forgiven and being with God, is made complete.

The eyewitness testimony of this truth continues. They have stood the test of time, held up under scrutiny so that we would have peace knowing Jesus rose from the dead. And he has brought you to know this witness and to share it with others. How will God use you as his witness? Just like how he knew Barsabbas' and Matthias' hearts, God also knows your heart. He knows your fears, your doubts. He also knows your faith. He knows the talents that he has given you. He gave you your mind and tongue and hands and feet. God has made you unique and is calling you to be his witness still today.

Where will God use you as his unique witness? Maybe it is right in the home, with your spouse, with your children and grandchildren, with your parents or grandparents. Maybe it is at work or at school or out at the grocery store or out serving your community. God gives us opportunities so that we can share what we have witnessed, that we can address the doubts of others that Jesus was really, really died to take away our sins, and really rose from the dead so that we fellowship with God, a complete joy.

God gave us many and varied eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection to take away our doubts and provide even more certainty that Jesus' mission succeeded, that our sins are forgiven, that we have fellowship with God right now and will get to enjoy that fellowship forever in heaven, making our joy complete. We also get to witness this to others. By doing so we will bring the same things to them. Thank you, God, for giving us such clear and reliable eyewitnesses to take away our doubts regarding your resurrection. Christ is risen; he is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.