

Title: “The Testimony of Witnesses”

Key verse: John 20:26-27 (NKJV) – “And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, ‘Peace to you!’”<sup>27</sup> Then He said to Thomas, ‘Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing’.”

Good morning, everyone. Christ is risen!

Last week, I told you about this traditional greeting on Easter Sunday: “Christ is risen ... He is risen indeed.” But it is a greeting that is not just for one day. Traditionally, for a few weeks after Easter, Christians are still celebrating the resurrection of Christ and they continue to use this greeting when meeting one another. So, you will hear this greeting from me a few more times in the coming weeks, both from the pulpit and when I greet some of you one-to-one.

Last week, we celebrated the resurrection of Christ, and in the passages of Scripture that I shared with you, I concentrated on the events of that first Easter Sunday. I told you about the various people who saw the risen Lord Jesus Christ that day – Mary Magdalene and the other women, the two men on the road to Emmaus, the disciples, and other people. I pointed out their eyewitness accounts: their testimonies of seeing the risen Lord. There is so much more that I could say on that topic, so I wish to continue that theme today and tell you more of the stories that come from that first Easter day and other stories continuing on from that day.

Although I will tell you more stories from that first Easter Sunday, today is actually one week after our Easter celebration and so I will begin with a story that takes place one week after the resurrection. I’m going to begin with the story of Thomas, who was not with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them on that first day. You may remember this man who is sometimes called “Doubting Thomas.” He had a hard time believing the report he heard from his fellow disciples, that Jesus had risen from the dead and visited the disciples in their room. But then Jesus appeared to them again one week later, and this time Thomas got to see Him too.

Today, this Sunday one week after Easter, is sometimes called “Thomas Sunday” in some church traditions. That is in recognition that Thomas got his chance to see the risen Lord on this day, and there is a lesson here for all of us. Let’s read his story, beginning on the evening of Easter.

John 20:24-27 (NKJV) – “Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.<sup>25</sup> The other disciples therefore said to him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ So he said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.’<sup>26</sup> And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, ‘Peace to you!’<sup>27</sup> Then He said to Thomas, ‘Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing’.”

You will recall from the account of the crucifixion of Christ that His hands were nailed to the cross and that after He died, the soldier stabbed His side with a spear to confirm that Christ was dead. Thomas knows this, and so when he heard the disciples tell him this incredible story of Jesus rising from the dead, he wants concrete evidence. He wants to see Jesus himself ... and he wants to be sure the man is no imposter by also demanding to see those wounds that ought to be on Jesus’ body. Only, then, Thomas says, will he believe the report.

That is like many of us, isn't it? We want proof. We want to see the concrete, definitive evidence. But life does not always give us everything we want. Sometimes, we have to rely on the testimony of others. I am like this – I wish to know the whole evidence, but I have learned that you don't necessarily get what you desire to have. I will tell you more of my own search for evidence later in today's message. Right now, I would like to return to Thomas's story and highlight a few more thoughts.

I note in this account that Jesus has a special sympathy for Doubting Thomas. Jesus turns His attention to Thomas and invites him to inspect His wounds. Thomas had earlier insisted that he would not believe that Jesus had really risen from the dead unless he could see and touch those wounds in Jesus' body. So, Jesus gives him that chance.

Verse 27 again – “Then He said to Thomas, ‘Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing’.”

The Bible doesn't say that Thomas actually then touched Jesus' wounds. I think that just meeting Jesus in person was enough to convince him that his beloved teacher had really risen from the dead. Thomas then made this exclamation in verse 28 – “And Thomas answered and said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” The encounter was overwhelming. His Lord had really risen from the dead. Thomas even calls him “God” – at several points in Jesus' ministry, there had already been indications that He was no ordinary human, that He was divine. He is the Son of God and He has the same nature as His Father in heaven. Thomas recognizes this and calls Him “God.”

Let's look again at the end of verse 27 – “... Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” Here is Jesus' invitation to Thomas and also to any of us: *Do not be unbelieving, but believing*. Due to the incredible nature of the recent events, many of Jesus's followers had had moments where they found these things to be beyond belief. That's OK. It's all right to have moments of unbelief or moments of doubt.

What you don't want to have is a hard heart of unbelief. Some people have hardened their hearts and refused to believe. Many of the Pharisees and religious leaders were like this. In the coming years of evangelistic growth, some people within the community attending Christian meetings had begun to harden their hearts, for one reason or another.

There is a warning to such people in the Letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews 3:12 (NIV) – “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.” Beware if your heart grows cold and hard due to sin and unbelief. A heart of unbelief will mean you will miss out on heaven.

The doubt that Thomas and other disciples experienced did not come from hardened hearts. Their doubt was temporary – they remained open to new information. In my younger days, I had some serious doubts about the Christian message. And I found a very helpful book. The book is entitled “Doubt,” and it was written by Os Guinness. He made a very important point that has remained with me all my life. He said doubt is different than unbelief. Unbelief is a refusal to believe, a decision not to believe – that is a dangerous place to be. But doubt is simply questioning ... doubt is hesitating and unsure what to believe ... doubt remains open-minded. Doubt has some questions that need answering. It is not a sin to have doubts. If you have doubts, please stay open-minded and keep on seeking to find the truth. This book helped me not to feel guilty about having doubts and it helped me become more stabilized in my faith.

Let me share with you a bit of my own experience. I told you last week that during my teenage years, I struggled with various doubts about whether Christianity was true. One of the things that bothered me was what I was being taught in science class at school. We are taught the theory of evolution, that mankind evolved from lower forms of life. Well, if that is true, then there is no Creator God and no reason to believe the message of the Bible. During my college years, I made an intense study of both the claims of Scripture and the claims of evolution. I wish I could tell you the whole story, but I don't have time today to do that. But I will share some highlights. I approached Scripture with skepticism and criticism ... and I approached evolution with skepticism and criticism. As part of my coursework at UCLA, I was actually obliged to take a course on evolution. I noticed various problems with the theory. And I had an honest professor – even though he was a believer in evolution, he also had some complaints about recent statements made in some scientific articles on the topic. Hmm – even evolutionists make mistakes and say unscientific things. And there was something else I noticed: that evolution is a theory, not a fact – no human being was there millions of years ago to observe the process of the evolution of man. The theory of evolution is really just a guess. There actually are a number of problems with the theory, which I can't describe for you today, but in recent years I have learned that there are quite a few responsible scientists these days, even non-Christian scientists, pointing out problems with that theory.

Meanwhile, back there in my college days, I was critiquing the Bible as well. But I noticed that this Book is full of peoples' testimonies about God's actions in their lives: creation, flood, the call of Abraham, the exodus, God's dealings with the kingdom of Israel, the ministry of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the explosive growth of the church. For a period of time, I resisted the implications of these testimonies, trying somehow to dismiss what I was reading. My skepticism ran deep. And then one day I glanced at a newspaper headline and my reaction to it showed me how ridiculous one's skepticism can be. The headline was reporting on the actions of the U.S. president – at that time, the president was Jimmy Carter. I don't remember what action was being reported, but I remember thinking, "How do I know that there really is a man named Carter who is president of the United States? I have never seen him or met him. Maybe these news reports are trying to fool me in some way." Like Doubting Thomas, I demanded to be able to see and experience this man in person.

Well, at the moment that I had that reaction to the newspaper headline, I realized that my skepticism had gone too far. Was anyone trying to fool me? Actually, I was making a fool of myself. The news media is not perfect, but several media outlets had been reporting on this man for several years, and reporting on his predecessors, like presidents Nixon and Ford. The actions of our politicians were a common topic of conversation in my home and at school. These men are real. I had to put confidence in the general reliability of the news reports – not perfect, but generally reliable.

In a similar manner, I learned that I could have confidence in the testimony of the eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These men and women were convinced by what they saw and heard. It changed their lives. It changed the course of human history. Many of these men and women were willing to die for their message: they believed it thoroughly. I learned that it was reasonable to put confidence in their testimony.

Let's return to the conversation between Jesus and Thomas. In the latter part of John 20:27 Jesus says, "Do not be unbelieving, but believing." Thomas is invited to discard his unbelief and believe in the risen Lord. Thomas exclaims in verse 28, "My Lord and my God!"

Let's read John 20:29 (NKJV) – “Jesus said to him, ‘Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’.” *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.* Blessed are you and me and the millions of people who have put their faith in Christ during the past 2,000 years – we haven't been able to see Jesus in person, but we believe this message and its life-transforming power.

John closes chapter 20 of his Gospel with these words in verses 30-31 – “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” You might wish to have more information about Jesus, but what is written down in the New Testament is sufficient for us to know God and experience the salvation that is found in Christ Jesus. What's written here is enough to foster faith in Christ.

Well, I have reached the halfway point in today's message. I wanted to share with you more stories of the eyewitness accounts to the resurrection, so now I'll tell you some of these stories.

Last week, I began with the story of Mary Magdalene and the other women. They were the faithful, loving followers of Christ who were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Each of the four Gospel accounts focuses on different aspects of the story. Let's first look at what Matthew writes. Matthew 28:1-2 (NIV) – “After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. <sup>2</sup> There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.”

The angel gave the women a message. About Jesus, the angel said in verses 6-7 – “‘He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’” Now I have told you’.”

The story continues in verses 8-10 – “So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me’.”

In the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Mary Magdalene has a special designation. She is called “the apostle to the apostles.” It is she who brought the good news to the apostles that the Lord Jesus had risen from the tomb.

It is quite remarkable that all four Gospel accounts tell us that the women were the first to report the news of the resurrection. I call it remarkable because at that period of time, the testimony of women was not considered to be reliable evidence that could be admissible in the courtroom. And yet, it is a part of the story of the resurrection of Christ. One reason why we can have confidence that this story is true is that if it were a fabrication, the writers of the gospel accounts would not say that women were the first witnesses. Indeed, later pagan critics of Christianity tried to criticize the gospel message because: who would believe women's testimony? But this is a part of the story, that women were the first witnesses. That cannot be denied. In fact, we embrace that story. And I think the fact that the Christian religion is the largest religion in the world is testimony to the fact that this message is true.

Let's see what the Gospel of Mark says. Mark 16:9-11(NASB) – “Now after He had risen early on the first day of the week, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven

demons. <sup>10</sup> She went and reported to those who had been with Him, while they were mourning and weeping. <sup>11</sup> And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they refused to believe it.”

Well, it isn't only Thomas who was refusing to believe this incredible news. This first group of disciples that Mary Magdalene reported to likewise found the news beyond belief.

But some of the disciples acted on the news. Let's read what the Gospel of John says. By the way, when you read the Gospel of John, you will notice that John doesn't like to name himself – but he is the second disciple mentioned in this story.

Let's read John 20:3-8 (NASB) – I like this story – “So Peter and the other disciple left, and they were going to the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead, faster than Peter, and came to the tomb first; <sup>5</sup> and he stooped to look in, and saw the linen wrappings lying there; however he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> So Simon Peter also came, following him, and he entered the tomb; and he looked at the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings but folded up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb also entered then, and he saw and believed.”

This was a quite a sight. John saw the empty tomb and the linen cloths. Some truly remarkable event had happened. John didn't see Jesus at this point, but he believed that something big had happened.

At some point during that day, Jesus Himself appeared to Peter. We don't have the narrative of that story, but we are told elsewhere that it happened. Last week, I told you a bit about the two men who had travelled to Emmaus – they are mentioned in Mark 16:12 and Luke 24:13-35. The men walked with Jesus along the road without recognizing Him. Let's read verses 30-35 (ESV) – “When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup> And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup> They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?’ <sup>33</sup> And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, <sup>34</sup> saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!’” <sup>35</sup> Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

They had previously heard a report that Simon Peter had seen the risen Jesus. When these men realized that they, too, were in the presence of Jesus, they rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. They excitedly reported to them that the reports that Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to Simon were indeed true!

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15, we also see Peter mentioned, this time using the name Cephas, which is the Aramaic version of the name Peter, which means “rock.” I read these verses to you last week, but let's look at them again. The Apostle Paul says this in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:3-8 (NASB) – “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; <sup>7</sup> then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; <sup>8</sup> and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.”

Notice in verse 5 that Christ made a special appearance to Peter (Cephas) before appearing to the group of twelve disciples. We don't know the details of that appearance – I guess we don't really need to know, otherwise God would have had that story written down for us. Verse 6 says that Jesus also appeared to more than 500 brothers, most of whom are still alive when Paul is writing to the Corinthians – that means that if they choose to do so, the Corinthians can seek out any of these 500 brothers to verify this report from eyewitnesses. Notice in verse 7 that James gets a special visit by Jesus. James was Jesus' half-brother – he is mentioned in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3, and apparently during Jesus' earthly ministry, His family members were not really followers of His. However, James receives a special appearance of Christ after the resurrection, and he is first mentioned as among the disciples in Acts 12:17. Then in Acts 15, Acts 21, and Galatians 1 and 2, James seems to be a leader in the Jerusalem church. Also, this man was the author of the Epistle of James. Now, looking back at our 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians passage, we see in verse 8 that last of all, Jesus makes an appearance to Paul – you can read that dramatic story in Acts 9.

Let's return to the scene on that first night in Jerusalem when Jesus appeared to the gathered disciples. The experience was evidently bewildering to them. Luke 24:36-39 (ESV) – “As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, ‘Peace to you!’<sup>37</sup> But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit.<sup>38</sup> And he said to them, ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?’<sup>39</sup> See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have’.”

They were startled and frightened and doubtful. They thought they saw a spirit. But Jesus invited them to examine His wounds and touch Him and thus prove that this was no spirit. Ah, this is why Thomas later insisted on doing the same thing: the disciples must have told them what Jesus had invited them to do. They could see that this was no spirit. Last week, I read for you verses 41-43 where they gave Jesus a piece of fish and He ate it, showing He had an actual body and was no spirit.

Let's take a look at how Mark describes this scene. Mark 16:14 (NKJV) – “Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.” He rebuked them for their unbelief and refusal to believe the initial reports of his resurrection. But I think He is also gracious to them, because He still sees potential in them and He wants to use them to reach the world. Look what is said in the very next verse, verse 15 (NASB) – “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation’.” Here is the first statement that He makes commissioning them to preach the gospel to the whole world. It is remarkable to me that despite their weaknesses, Jesus still wants this group of disciples to spread the gospel message worldwide.

Later on, they go to Galilee as the angel had originally instructed the women to tell the disciples to do. There on a mountain, Jesus Christ commissions His apostles once more. Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV) – “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.<sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’.”

Here, Jesus commissions His followers to make disciples of all nations. As I have read the New Testament and seen these apostles spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire and as I have read church history and seen missionaries spread the message to the ends of the earth and as I have watched the contemporary church do the work of the ministry, it never ceases to amaze me that Jesus Christ has chosen us imperfect human beings to spread the message of salvation around the

world. Us imperfect human beings. That's the way He has chosen to accomplish this task – through you and me. Not only do we spread the message to others, but as we do so God is working in the hearts of every individual Christian – you and me – to form His character in us as we exercise our spiritual gift and play our part in the work of the ministry.

In today's sermon, I have shared with you a variety of testimonies of the people who saw the risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. These were life-changing events for these people. And they changed the course of history when they spread the gospel story and established churches.

I would like to close today's sermon with a statement by the Apostle John. I am really touched by the opening lines of his first epistle. Let's read 1<sup>st</sup> John 1:1-3 (NKJV) – “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— <sup>2</sup> the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us— <sup>3</sup> that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

John and the other apostles spread the message about what they had seen and heard and touched ... concerning the Word of Life, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. We can have eternal life. We can have fellowship with God our Creator and with His Son Jesus Christ. And John invites us into fellowship with the disciples of Jesus.

Remember, last week I told you that God has given to us the “ministry of reconciliation” – that's in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:18-19. It is the message of how to be reconciled with our Creator and how to be reconciled with each other. Today I have just read for you John's desire that we have fellowship with God, with His Son, and with the disciples of Jesus. This is made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for sin and who triumphed over death. This is the message of reconciliation we bring to the world. This is the message that changes people and changes the world. May you accept this reconciliation and live life to the fullest, in fellowship with God and with His people.