

Purpose: to encourage you to trust and obey the risen Messiah.
“Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...”

The Martyrs Speak!

Written by: Mick Abraham

The Quest

In any situation, the best way to know what really happened is to be there yourself. If this is not possible, the next best strategy is to rely on witnesses. Of all possible types of witnesses, the “eyewitness” is most valuable. Many have testified about the life of Jesus Christ. One of these witnesses was the apostle John. He wrote firsthand of things **“which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched...we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard...”**

John wrote about the indestructible life of Christ: **“The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and has appeared to us...”** I John 1.

The Question

The physical resurrection of Christ is one of the most amazing accounts in the Bible. (It’s also one of the most difficult for “modern man” to believe.) In his gospel, John (the “other disciple”) gives a report on the empty tomb: **“Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.”**



John 20 and 21 record the experience of additional witnesses, including the once skeptical Thomas. **“(The resurrected) Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples....”**

The Quantity of Witnesses

In I Corinthians 15, Paul states: **“...He was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and...He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time...Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all He appeared to me also...”**

In Acts 1, Dr. Luke states: **“After His suffering, (Christ) showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”** Regardless of the century, people would be anxious to see the man who had accurately predicted His own resurrection, so those forty days were probably very busy. Immediately before his physical departure from earth, Christ told His followers, **“...you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

The Quality of Witnesses

Two witnesses are better than one. Two thousand would be better still, but only if they are honest and credible. After all, what good are many witnesses if they are fraudulent? Even though none of the first century witnesses are available for cross examination, their sincerity can still be validated in a surprising way.

Sometimes a witness may be very certain of his testimony. In other cases, he may be quite uncertain. Imagine the highest level of certainty; now imagine how that could be demonstrated. The most sincere witness might say, “I would stake my life on the truth of this testimony.” As you’ll see, the first century witnesses did exactly this!

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Some History

In the first century, Palestine was controlled by Rome—that most powerful nation. The Roman government had approved some religions (including Judaism), but the others were on thin ice. The authorities *briefly* viewed Christianity as a sect within Judaism, but this opinion was only temporary. As the fledgling faith began to stand alone, it was seen as “operating without a license”. Christian concepts were incompatible with pagan culture, and they were a challenge to Roman authority. These factors placed the new believers on a collision course with Rome.

Incompatibilities

One of the more “troubling” Christian doctrines was (and is) the bodily resurrection. If “the King of the Judeans” is risen, that means the mighty Romans were unable to conquer Him. A leader who lives today is better than the Roman emperors (who claimed to be gods, yet remain in their graves). Even the pride of human science and medicine are challenged by the resurrection. It shakes up the world of men.

Those who reported seeing the crucified King “alive and well” had reason to believe that His followers would someday be similarly raised. Ancient prophecies such as Hosea 13:14 gained new meaning: **“I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?”** If death had lost its sting, then Rome had lost an important method for controlling her subjects.

For these reasons, any mention of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was intolerable to Rome. Therefore, the witnesses were confronted with a difficult choice: those who insisted on saying such things must be silenced.

Even when faced with torment and death, many first century witnesses would not change their testimony. Their credibility is thus underscored in red.

The Quantity of Martyrs

Ask yourself: how many deaths would it take to have an impact on the very meaning of language? Hundreds? Thousands? The Greek language itself serves as a master witness to the reality of the resurrection. When the word “witness” appears in our English New Testament, the foundational Greek word is “martus” (Strong’s Concordance #3144). There was a time when martus meant only “witness”, “record”, “report”, etc.

However, so many of the early martus were willing to be murdered for the sake of their convictions that this word developed an additional meaning. It’s the only ancient Greek equivalent for “martyr”. Think of it: such great numbers of early witnesses also became martyrs that the same word came to carry both meanings!

The Martyrs Speak—Will We Listen?

The martyrs had direct knowledge of the “empty tomb” as a compelling historical event—so compelling that they were willing to enter their own tombs prematurely. What more could they have done to make us believe their testimony? More important: what will we do with the evidence that they paid for with their very lives?

To see what these early witnesses would want us to do, let us return to the martus named John:

“These (things) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.” John 20:31

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