

True Witnesses Mark 16

All the gospel writers agree on this: women were the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. Now, we modern Americans probably don't find this remarkable – after all, we support women's rights and freedoms in all sorts of ways, and we rightly express indignation when women are abused or taken advantage of. So why shouldn't women have been the first to see the empty tomb?

Well, lots of people in Mark's time didn't see things that way. The Old Testament made it clear, for example, that women's ability to make vows was strictly limited by their husbands or fathers – simply put, if they made a promise of which their husband or father didn't approve, that promise was considered null and void. In the Jewish culture of the day, therefore, women were not always seen to be reliable witnesses.

And what about Mary Magdalene? All four of the gospel writers mention her as a witness to the resurrection. Now, we don't know much about her, but Mark does remind us in verse 9 that Jesus had cast seven demons out of her on one occasion – not exactly the sort of item any of us would put on a resume. Given her history, when she talked about Jesus rising from the dead, it would be easy for her listeners to conclude that the demons had somehow come back and she was just raving, that she wasn't in her right mind.

But regardless of how skeptical contemporary men might have been about their testimony, the Easter message did in fact come first to these women, not to the 11 remaining male disciples. But the sad fact is that, for whatever reason, the disciples didn't choose to believe them.

And that disbelief seems to be one of the central emphases of Mark's account. For if you think about it, none of the people who received the good news of Jesus' resurrection reacted the way that they should have, at least at first. And the women were no exception to this pattern. Remember – in verse 7, the angel directs them to go and tell Jesus' disciples what they had seen and heard, that the tomb was empty because Jesus had risen from the dead. But verse 8 tells us that their first reaction, whether from unbelief or simply from fear and astonishment, was not to say anything to anyone.

But they weren't the only disobedient ones, were they? For Mary Magdalene eventually did manage to pull herself together and to tell the disciples about the empty tomb. But even though she found them mourning and weeping for Jesus, even though her story should therefore have been the best news they could possibly have heard, none of them believed her.

But that wasn't just because Mary was a woman. After all, verse 12 says that Jesus also appeared to two of them, two men. But when Jesus revealed Himself to them, and when they ran back to share the good news, Mark says that the rest of the disciples still wouldn't believe them, at least not at first.

Now, I think the disciples' skepticism is easy for us to understand, at least emotionally. After all, they had just lost their beloved Teacher, someone Whom they had admired and worshipped, someone with Whom they had travelled and studied for most of the last three years. Moreover, in His death, all their fondest wishes for the redemption of Israel had been dashed. He had proven His power through

countless amazing miracles, but yet He couldn't – or wouldn't – stop Himself from being arrested and murdered.

No, nothing about Jesus made sense to them anymore. So, as they were trying to process all their grief, they just couldn't summon the strength to handle what must have seemed to them to be a cruel joke.

So yes, we can certainly understand the disciples' skepticism. And deep down, some of us may still share it. There may be some here today who still can't manage to bring themselves to believe that anyone could possibly come back to life after being dead for several days. If that's true for you, you can take comfort that all of Jesus' disciples also found His resurrection unbelievable – at least at first.

But wait – if their initial, skeptical reaction to the news of the empty tomb had been right, then how can we possibly explain the tremendous change that came over all of them? For no honest historian can deny that all of Jesus' followers had abandoned Him when He was arrested. They had, in fact, left Him to die on the cross alone. Before He died, before He was laid in that tomb, all of His disciples, both men and women, had in one way or another lost faith in Him.

And yet verse 20 summarizes another truth that no honest historian can deny – that soon after Jesus died on the cross, His 11 remaining disciples were completely transformed. Far from being afraid to admit that they knew Him, they went all throughout the known world proclaiming the truth of that most important historical fact, a fact of which they had at first been so skeptical – that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead on the third day. And history records that many of them eventually chose to die as martyrs rather than to deny this truth.

So, regardless of how rational their skepticism may have seemed to them, or to some of us, it's just not right to go on doubting something that is, in fact true. That's why verse 14, says Jesus rebuked, He reproached the disciples for their unbelief and their hardness of heart. And believe it or not, it is precisely this rebuke that should give all of us more fuel for our own faith in the resurrection, and in Jesus Himself.

Why is that? Well, on the one hand, Jesus' rebuke serves to underline the essential honesty of the apostolic witness. After all, if Peter and the rest of the apostles had just made up all this stuff about the resurrection, would it have made sense for them to paint themselves in such an unfavorable light? Indeed, why would these men have credited a bunch of women as the first witnesses of the resurrection? No, when the disciples admit their own skepticism, and when Jesus rebukes them for their lack of faith, the whole story has a ring of truth about it, doesn't it?

But on the other hand, there's another reason that Jesus was so upset with them. For you see, they had not only refused to believe the testimony of the women and the other eyewitnesses of the resurrection. No, they had also refused to believe the testimony of Jesus Himself.

For what did our responsive reading say? On at least three occasions, Jesus had specifically told them that, regardless of their expectations, He was not going to Jerusalem to sit on David's throne and rule over David's kingdom. No, Jesus kept on telling them, in ever more explicit detail, that He was going to be mocked and scourged with a whip, and killed. But He also told them, even before He was arrested, that He would rise from the dead on the third day. The amazing truth is that the first witness

to the truth of the resurrection, the first person to announce the glory of the empty tomb, was Jesus Himself, even before He had died.

So, no, it wasn't right for the disciples to go on doubting the witnesses to the resurrection, for that meant they were doubting Jesus Himself. For Who else but the Son of God could be in such command of all the events of history as to predict everything that would happen to Him? And Who else but the Son of God could possibly rise from the dead?

But here's the best news of all, for them as well as for us. For the fact is that Jesus came to the women, no matter how fearful and hesitant they were to proclaim the resurrection. The fact is that Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples, no matter how little faith they placed in His prophecies. And did you notice in verse 7 that the angel specifically told the women to make sure to deliver their message to Peter? Even though Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus was determined to welcome Peter, to include Peter as one of the disciples.

And that may be the most amazing thing about Jesus, even more amazing than His prophetic powers, even more amazing than His resurrection from the dead: for even though His disciples had all abandoned Him, even though none of them died with Him, even though none of them believed what He had predicted about His death and resurrection, He never gave up on them. The amazing truth is that He went to the cross for them anyway.

And that's the good news for us too. For Jesus really did die to pay the penalty that all our sins deserve - even the sin of our own skepticism, even the sin of our refusing to trust what He has said to us. And the good news is that Jesus rose from the dead, no matter what any of us thinks about it. And it is His resurrection that not only proves the truth of everything He said about Himself. It is His resurrection that not only proves that God has accepted the sacrifice He has offered to save sinners like us. The resurrection of Jesus also guarantees that all who trust in Him also rise from the dead one day, and have eternal life with Him forever.

And so no, it just doesn't make sense to go on doubting Jesus. For the fact is that He has risen. The fact is that He is alive today, ruling Heaven and Earth at the right hand of the Father. So on this Easter Sunday, and every day let us trust in His sacrifice and in His resurrection. Let us accept His welcome and forgiveness. And just as the disciples did, let's share this good news with the world.