

Witnesses to the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

A Sermon preached by Carol Gregg at the Easter Sunrise Service in Duke Gardens
April 5, 2015

Sometimes, we are fortunate to witness something wonderful or beautiful.

In the dark of the night, we may treasure the beauty of a full moon, and notice the shadows it casts. In the morning dawn, we might take delight in seeing deer in our neighborhood. These are common sights, made more special when we pause to take them in.

Other sights are not common at all. Last month, residents in northern Europe and the United Kingdom had the chance to see a total solar eclipse. The period of greatest darkness lasted less than three minutes; the whole event could have been easy to miss by those who were indoors or sleeping. Those who made a point of seeing the eclipse described it as “breathtaking” and “extraordinary.”¹ While intentionally can help us see the remarkable, training can as well. Recently, a biologist in San Francisco was thrilled to see a gray fox in The Presidio, which is part of the National Park system. It is the first time a gray fox has been in the area for more than a decade;² only a trained eye would notice the animal. In Yosemite National Park, another fox sighting was rarer still. With the help of a motion sensor camera that caught the picture, the rare Nevada red fox was seen in Yosemite this winter, the first time in nearly 100 years.³

While nature gives us glimpses of wonder and beauty, humanity can as well. Consider the wonder that is happening in the Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis this weekend. While TV allows you to see the impressive athleticism of the Final Four is never the same as being there in person.

To see a rare sight, an eclipse, a fox, a game, is a privilege and a joy. This morning, we discover that to be a witness can be life-changing.

In the scripture reading for this morning from I Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here in the end of the letter, at its climax, Paul recites the historic faith of the church and proclaims that Jesus was raised

¹ Total Solar Eclipse March 20, 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-31965456>

² Rare Fox Sighting http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/23/gray-fox-san-francisco_n_6739962.html

³ Rare Fox Spotted <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/29/us/california-sierra-nevada-red-fox/>

from the dead. Using a formula that was likely given to him, and functions as one of the earliest creeds of the church, Paul declares “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (I Cor 15:3-4). This is the essence of the faith, what the early church taught and proclaimed. Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised. Paul then goes on to enumerate all those to whom the Risen Lord appeared. Do take note here that Paul’s letter to the Corinthians was written a decade or so before the first gospel is written. Paul tells the story differently than the gospel writers and we don’t know his sources⁴. His focus is not on the details of the empty tomb; here he is focusing on those who witnessed the Risen Christ.

First in the list, Paul writes “that [Jesus] appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” (I Cor 15:5) Cephas is the Aramaic name for Peter. If we know the story at all, wouldn’t we expect Jesus to appear to his closest followers? They may have had their doubt and desperation, and yet, they were the ones that traveled with Jesus for three years, listened to him teach, and tried to follow in his footsteps. The twelve remind us of the 12 tribes of Israel, and in many ways are the new Israel, the people through whom God will work. It makes sense that Jesus would appear to them.

Next Paul says that Jesus appeared “to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time.” (I Cor 15:6) Nowhere else in scripture do we have a record of the Resurrected Jesus appearing to 500 people. Paul seems to be pointing out that there were many who saw the Risen Lord, some of whom were still alive, and could bear witness to what they have seen. To me, this seems to be an extension of the appearance to the disciples. They are described as brothers and sisters. Presumably these were also followers of Jesus; ones who were sympathetic to his ministry, perhaps predisposed to affirm his resurrection.

Next on the list is James, the brother of Jesus. Jesus appeared to his brother, and yet when he was alive, his brothers did not believe in him.⁵ One time when Jesus was traveling in Galilee, his brothers encouraged him to leave and challenged him to show himself and as the Gospel of John notes, “not even his brothers believed in him.” (John 7:3-5) They wanted him to leave. And now as the resurrected One, he shows himself to James. James could not have been prepared for or expecting any

⁴ *First Corinthians* Richard Hays, p. 257

⁵ *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* Gordon Fee, p. 731

such thing. After James sees Jesus alive, he comes to faith and quickly becomes a leader in the early church.⁶

After Paul expansively claims that Jesus appeared to “all the apostles” he concludes his list by saying, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” (I Cor 15:7-9)

Peter and the apostles were actively missing Jesus, grieving his death, perhaps longing for one more moment with him. The 500 had listened to the gospel story and trusted Jesus. It makes sense that Jesus would appear to these followers. Despite all the conflicting emotions of the recent days, if any one was ready to experience the resurrection, if it is possible to open to a miracle, they were ready and open.

Then James, who didn't believe in Jesus? OK, he was his brother.

But Paul? The persecutor of the church? The one who watch Stephen be stoned? How could Paul possibly be in this list? Jesus appeared to Peter, to the apostles, to the 500, to James,... to Paul! Paul is claiming that on the Road to Damascus the Risen Lord appeared to him, a persecutor, in a manner similar to how he appeared to the most committed disciples. This miracle, this rare sighting, this wonder of wonders, is given to one who did not want it. He hadn't looked for it, prepared for it, prayed for it. Just the opposite. He was fighting Jesus. And yet, the Risen Lord appeared to him changing his life forever.

If it is possible, this is good news on top of good news. The One who died on a cross was raised to new life and appeared to believers, to a non-believer, and to one who was hostile. This Risen Christ is for all. And all who saw the Resurrected Lord, all who witnessed this miracle, were changed forever. So whether our faith is strong or weak, whether we are working for God or occasionally against God, the Risen Lord is willing to come to us.

In Christ, we are offered new life.

In Christ, we believe in the resurrection of the dead.

In Christ, the power of sin and death is broken forever.

In Christ, the grace of God transforms us.

⁶ *Reflecting the Glory: Meditations for Living Christ's Life in the World* N.T. Wright, p. 148

Sometimes we are fortunate to witness of a great wonder or beauty. Today, we bear witness to a miracle. The miracle of resurrection.

Christ is Risen.

He is Risen Indeed.