

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Witness of the Resurrection”
Acts 10:34-43**

**Resurrection of the Lord
April 16, 2017**

Introduction

We just heard a beautiful Cantata by our wonderfully talented and blessed choir. The message they shared is one that reaches across history and across borders. In that light, I want to share with you a brief message on this very testimony of Jesus Christ. Listen to these words of Scripture from the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, verses thirty-four to forty-three.

Acts 10:34-43

So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

“The Witness of the Resurrection”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our Lord will stand forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our passage this morning places us right in the ministry of St. Peter, in whom Christ established his Church, and who also thrice denied our Lord during Jesus’ trials. Peter now finds himself in the living room of the Roman centurion Cornelius. This is big news, because up to this point, the Gospel was being preached only to Jews and Jewish converts. In a dream, God reveals to Peter, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” “Peter will draw the valid inference that this change in the ceremonial law represents God’s intention to welcome Gentiles into His community by faith in Christ.”¹ God has determined us—you, me, and all our generations and ancestor—as welcome to faith and life in Christ. My friends, this is truly good news!

We heard the Good News here this morning. We heard it proclaimed through song by the beautiful voices of our choir. You heard it proclaimed in Scripture as Peter taught it to Cornelius and his household. What does it mean, then, to witness the Good News? Well, Peter tells us that he is a witness “of all that [Jesus] did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem.”² What does it mean to be a witness of the resurrection? Well, this morning I want to quickly answer this question in good Baptist fashion with three points. To explore these points, we’re going to look at the nuances of prepositions. Exciting, right? I promise I’ll keep it brief.

¹ *Reformation Study Bible*, footnote 10:15, page 1933.

² Acts 10:39a

The first point is this: The witness *of* the Resurrection. Now by this, I'm talking about the actual events of Holy Week. In order for us to fully grasp the weight and impact of the Gospel, we must first believe in the Gospel. It's one thing to believe the Gospel theoretically and philosophically, but it's something else to believe it and have it impact every aspect of your life. You and I could engage in hours of debating the finer points of Newtonian gravitation and Lagrangian field theory, but at the end of the day, my worldview and my life is likely to remain unchanged. The Resurrection, if approached philosophically, at the end of the day will amount to nothing. The effect of the Gospel only comes when we accept the witness of Scripture not only as timelessly impactful, but also as historically true. In fact, Jesus Christ, himself, said in Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent and believe in the gospel.*" That was at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. And the message remained the same throughout. Near the end of Mark's Gospel, Jesus again tells his disciples, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."³ The witness *of* the Good News must be received before we can ever be changed *by* the Good News.

Last week, a new movie came out called *The Case for Christ*. Now, I haven't seen it yet, but I did find a conversation with the person the movie is based on. "In *The Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel was...a skeptic looking to disprove the factual claims of Christ. He makes a thorough journalistic investigation of the Christian claims that Jesus Christ bodily rose from the dead. As a legal editor at *The Chicago Tribune*, he asks all the right empirical questions: who, what, when, where, how? He digs into all the right disciplines: reliability of witness accounts, multiple attestations, proof of actual physical death, the possibility of mass hallucination, etc. Eventually, Strobel comes to the end of the [long list of] questions that would disprove the validity of the resurrection and must face the possibility that it's actually true." Strobel shares this about his search:

"Christianity is unusual among world religions in that it invites investigation. The apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 17, if Jesus had not been raised, you might as well as walk away from all of this. You know? You're fully justified in rejecting this faith. So, it makes certain claims of things that happened in history, that Jesus, it claims, lived, and He died and then He was reliably encountered afterwards. Those are historical issues that can be investigated just as you can investigate any other historical issues...Christianity says, '...Bring it on. Check us out. Investigate it yourself. Look at the evidence,' because it has confidence that there were footprints left in history by Jesus, and if we investigate those footprints we find that they point towards the truth of who He claimed to be."

"This [is] where the skeptic's questions change. If...the factual claims of Christ are true, that he suffered and died on a Roman cross and was later seen alive, then it begs an important question: Why? Why would God send His one and only Son into a world that He knew would condemn Him to death, strip Him of His dignity, and ruthlessly crucify Him? Why would God do that? That answer, love. The Bible reveals it was for love that God sent His only Son to die for us. John 3:16 says so but so do other passages like First John 4:9-10. 'In this the love of God was

³ Mark 16:16

made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.’ Propitiation is a theological word rarely heard in virtually any context other than this. There just aren’t other conversations, beyond those about Jesus, where the holiness of God is fully satisfied through substitutionary atonement. The righteous wrath of a perfect God could not be just set aside—then God would not be just. Our debt of sin was not ignored—it was paid in full by Christ’s death in our place. The questions of what, when, where, how and who are all answered in the Biblical accounts of the final week of Jesus’ life on earth. We can go a thousand rounds with the who-what-where’s of the circumstances and the evidence, but eventually we have to decide what to do with it.”⁴

What do we do with the witness of the resurrection? To answer this question, we’ll look at the other two points. The following two prepositions are very similar, and linguistically they are used interchangeably. After we believe in the Resurrection, we are called to be witnesses *to* the Resurrection and *for* the Resurrection. When we are witnesses to the Resurrection, we are doing what Christ commanded of his disciples, to go and spread the Good News. In witness to the Gospel, we are challenged to live for the sake of the Gospel. The Good News is this: Christ Jesus died for you. He died so that you might have eternal life in him. He died so that we might have victory over sin and death itself. We live because of the Gospel, for without the Resurrection, we would be hopelessly lost. But we have a hope, therefore we are witnesses *to* the Good News by our acts of piety and evangelism. St. Matthew reports that after the resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to observe Christ’s commandments. We witness to the Gospel when we take on piety, putting on Christ as Paul teaches the Colossians. Our “new identities, already bestowed by God’s grace through faith, take shape as [we] come to know Christ better, since He is the image of the invisible God and the one in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.”⁵ By following Paul’s command to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, and Jesus’s command to live renewed and reborn lives, we witness to that same, regenerative Good News.

Finally, we are witnesses *for* the Resurrection. Again, these last two are similar, but are nuanced here. To witness for the Resurrection is to allow the Gospel to live through us. God sent the Son to die on the cross and to raise from the grave *for us*. God did this graciously and freely, for we did not earn redemption. We are called, then, to be a witness for the Good News through love. We love God with our whole selves and love our neighbors as we love ourselves because of the Gospel. To be a witness for the Gospel is to be like the sheep likened to the righteous in Matthew 25. There, Jesus says “‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” We cannot

⁴ <https://reconnectwithcarmen.com/christianity-invites-skeptic-ask-why-easter/>

⁵ *Reformation Study Bible*, note 3:12, page 2127.

ignore those in need; we are charged by the Gospel to be stewards and caregivers, visitors and liberators, peacemakers and truth-tellers. To fall short in this is to fall short in our witness. And my friends, to witness is what we are called to do. This is the proper, nay, the only response to the Good News of the resurrection! What does the Lord require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God? By seeing to the needs of the oppressed and standing with the persecuted, we stand in witness for the Resurrection.

Please join me, now, in prayer. Wonderful and Loving God, You gave us Your Son Jesus Christ, and we are united with him in a death like his, and likewise united with him in a resurrection like his. “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.”⁶ Therefore, O God, we, too, consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to You in Christ Jesus. Help us to be witnesses *of* the Resurrection, witnesses *to* the Resurrection, and witnesses *for* the Resurrection. In the name of our risen Savior, we pray. Amen.

⁶ Romans 6:6-10