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Christian Perspectives

The event of Easter has come and gone. Perhaps you went to a church as part of your celebrations. People seem to be doing this less and less these days. In some ways I understand this. On an average Sunday, the sermon is often about the teaching of Christ. Who can argue with the logic and human compassion behind ?love your neighbour as yourself? or ?forgive others?? But on an Easter Sunday, the sermon challenges us to accept that Jesus lived again in bodily form after hundreds of people witnessed his death on a wooden cross, execution in the style of the Roman empire of the time. This is particularly difficult for those who are unaccustomed to hearing timely interpretations of the Bible on a regular basis.

At the time of Jesus' resurrection it was very important that the disciples come to the full realization of what they were experiencing. The record shows that Jesus appeared to them a number of times and showed them his hands and feet and invited them to touch him. The disciples were not easily convinced that their senses were giving them accurate feedback. So, on one occasion, Jesus asked for something to eat and devoured a piece of fish while they watched according to the testimony in the Gospel of Luke.

To the physical evidence Jesus added teaching. He opened their minds so that they would understand how the Law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms pointed to the Messiah. They became the witnesses who had both seen the risen Lord and understood why he had suffered and died. Only short days ago the value of everything Jesus had taught them and the promise of the kingdom of peace and prosperity for all seemed an exercise in futility. Jesus was gone and everything they had cherished had been lost. Now they had witnessed its restoration, its fulfillment.

What does it means to be a witness? Some time ago, I watched a documentary about a detective from the Toronto Police Force who decided to use modern investigative techniques to try to solve the case of the massacre of a family known as the Black Donnellys. The murders happened in the 1880's. Most of you will know something of the story. When an angry mob attacked the Donnelly homestead around midnight, a visitor, an Irish lad of thirteen was also living in the home. He hid under his cot on the ground floor and observed the murders without being detected. When the house was set on fire, this boy escaped and ran to a neighbouring farmhouse. Although he was the key witness at the trial, his evidence was disregarded because he was deemed to be too young to understand and retain what he claimed to have seen. In the documentary, the Toronto detective showed the court record of the boy's testimony to a forensic testimony expert who analyzed the text, the pattern of the language used and particularly something he referred to as ?personal commitment to the testimony.? The lad showed this commitment through consistent use of personal statements in the past tense. He had total conviction in what he had observed. The language analysis indicated that the boy had actually experienced what he testified.

But how does this connect to the testimony of the disciples? Well, they were able to testify that Jesus had risen from the dead because they had actually experienced Jesus as resurrected. They could testify that he was the anticipated messiah because they understood how the prophecies had been fulfilled. They could do this on the personal level of actually having been there. Their conviction in their own testimony convinced others who had not known Jesus resurrected and those who had not known Jesus at all. But, you might ask, what was the value of that testimony when the first string witnesses had all died off. Did we only have then, those who were witnesses of the original witnesses but not of the risen Christ themselves? This way of looking at it would seem to indicate that the strength of the witness would slowly diminish over time. Fortunately, the record of the scripture froze the witness at a certain point.

As a further study, it could be interesting to have a forensic testimony expert look at the witness of the disciples of Jesus. That expert might well find the same ?personal commitment to the testimony? that the lad who witnessed the murders of the Black Donnellys had exhibited. Perhaps that has already been done and would prove interesting reading. It is certainly hard to believe that the story of the death and resurrection of Christ would have persisted for two millennia unless that strength of ?commitment to the testimony? of the disciples was evident in their witness.

By Rev. Stephanie Pellow