

Beyond the Doubts of Shadows

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 24:13-35

A year ago I had the chance to sit on a federal jury up in Tampa. For my entire adult life I rested comfortably in the assurance that lawyers never select pastors for juries because we're too nice. Evidently I don't look very nice and I got picked. Even ended up the foreman. I must really not be nice. It was a five day trial. Product liability. We had to deem whether a certain product was deficient and the cause of a house fire. It was a very technical case, high above my pay grade. Experts from all over the country were brought in to testify about the materials and physics and atmospheric conditions and we on the jury were left to discern the veracity of the testimony and the strength of the case brought by the prosecution against the defendant. It was five of the most interesting days of my life. And it would take an entire sermon to explain that last sentence. But one of the reasons it was interesting to me was that it was not a slam dunk case. Questions hovered – some never adequately answered. The field of evidence had been compromised. And like in most trials, I suppose, we jurors were left to judge not only on the substance of the evidence, but the integrity of the testimony. And when we went to deliberations we jurors didn't all agree. It wasn't *Twelve Angry Men*, but it took a while to get on the same page.

Now since this trial last year had taken place eight days after Easter it got me to thinking about the story I had just preached upon, and upon which I am preaching today. The resurrection of Jesus. How would the resurrection of Jesus stand up in court?

If you and I were sitting on a first century jury how would we weigh the evidence? How would we judge the integrity of the testimony?

At best the gospel writers paint for us a pretty confusing scene. The shadows of an early morning. One moment an empty tomb, grave clothes strewn about. Another moment the tomb occupied by two visitors dressed in white asking what all the crying is about. And then a man wandering by who first looks like the gardener and then all of a sudden looks like Jesus. And all this testimony offered by a woman with tears in her eyes and who is reported to have once been possessed by seven demons? There are holes in this story big enough through which to drive a Mack truck. No iPhone videos of Jesus re-accommodating himself.

So call to the witness stand for further corroboration the two men in our story this morning. The two travelers to Emmaus. Perry Mason could very well have had them for lunch. "So gentlemen, you say you were walking down the road and a man joined you but you did not recognize him?" "Yes." "You say you talked for quite a while and you did not recall his voice?" "Yes." "You say he explained to you the teachings of the Old Testament that pointed to the resurrection of the Messiah and yet you still did not put two and two together?" "Yes." "And you say it wasn't until you had dinner together and he took, blessed, broke and gave you the bread that your eyes were opened?" "Yes." "And now you are expecting this court to believe your testimony that the dead man Jesus is now alive?" "Yes." I have no further questions your honor. Let's be honest no prosecuting attorney worth his or her salt --- could not pull out of this story a reasonable doubt. Too many shadows ... too many tears ... too many unanswered questions. I mean, the whole thing just would not hold up in court.

“We have heard the voice. Felt the presence. Seen the movement. He is alive. We have seen the Lord.”

But, of course, it never was supposed to hold up in court. If the Gospel writers had been concerned about something holding up in court they would have written a different story. The sun would have been high in the sky. The angels would have waited for Mary to get there before they rolled the stone away. Jesus would have appeared with a name tag on that would have said: "Hello, my name is Jesus." And, of course, Mary would have had no tears in her eyes because she would have taken it rather matter-of-factly. "Oh, hey Jesus, where you been?" And those travelers to Emmaus would have recognized him right from the start.

But that's just not how resurrections occur. Resurrections are confusing. They are surprising. They are tearful. They are unsettling. They are often the last thing we expect. And at the end of the day all that Mary and those men can say after having been cross-examined by the throngs is I can't explain the shadows, I can't explain the stone, I can't explain the angels, I can't explain the gardener, I can't explain the breaking of the bread, but this I know, I heard the voice, I felt the presence, I saw the movement, and somehow I know he is alive. It doesn't matter what anybody else thinks, it doesn't matter if it doesn't hold up in court – what matters is that it holds up in here. What matters is I heard the voice, I felt the presence, I saw the movement, and I know that he is alive.

Such has always been the witness of the church. Individual like you and me saying, "I've heard the voice, I felt the presence, I saw the movement, I believe the testimony of those who were there and I know that he is alive." It was the witness of Mary, of Thomas, of Peter, of Paul, of the men walking to Emmaus, of the five hundred who witnessed his appearing. "It may not hold up in court," they all say, "but it holds up here. It holds up inside here. It holds up inside me."

When I was fourteen years old my parents took me to what was then the Soviet Union. It was the height of the Cold War. The Berlin Wall an impenetrable fortress. We passed through Checkpoint Charlie into East Berlin and then flew to Moscow and then on to what was then Leningrad. It made for another of the most interesting days of my life. And what struck me as a fourteen year old behind the iron curtain were all the empty churches. All the empty churches and cathedrals. Religion had been outlawed. Padlocks on cathedral doors. Beautiful, multi-domed, Byzantine houses of worship vacated, some turned into museums. If you were a social scientist the evidence may have pointed you to render the verdict that God was dead. Jesus was dead. His beautiful mansions empty of any trace of God's presence. But of course such a social scientist would have been dead wrong. Because he would have looked in all the wrong places. He would have missed the very place where the risen Jesus abides – inside his people. Inside the caverns

of people who quietly said their prayers and paid homage to their icons and sang their doxologies.

On that first Easter morning a startled woman staggers from the shadows of a cemetery and from the bottom of her heart preaches the first Christian sermon: “I have seen the Lord.” And later the chorus from those two perplexed travelers: “We have seen the Lord.”

Father Gregory Boyle, author of one of the better books I’ve read, *Tattoos on the Heart*, tells of the time when he was a young, wet-behind-the-ears, novice priest and was sent to Bolivia to serve the people there. So with broken Spanish the young priest went. And he struggled there to make a difference. And he tells of the time when he was asked to go up into the mountains to a village where dwelled a tribe of people who had not seen a priest in a decade. So the young Father Boyle went. And on his way up the mountain he realized he had forgotten his service book – the book that he needed in order to conduct mass. So not only did he not know enough Spanish, he didn’t even have the liturgy to limp through. So he arrived at the village and stumbled through the liturgy making things up as he went. Doing his best to quote any scripture he knew. Feeling quite the sham. He found the experience quite devastating. He was humiliated and felt like the worst priest walking the planet. As he gathers his belongings to make the dejected trek back down the mountain he looks across the empty field ahead and an old man is walking across the field toward him. “He appears ancient,” Boyle writes, “but I suspect his body has been weathered by work and the burden of an Indian’s life. As he nears me, I see he is wearing tethered wool pants, with a white buttoned shirt, greatly frayed at the collar. He has a rope for a belt. His suit coat is coarse and worn. He has a fedora, toughened by the years. He is wearing sandals, and his feet are caked with Bolivian mud. Any place

that a human face can have wrinkles and creases, he has them. He is at least a foot shorter than I am, and he stands right in front of me and says, “*Gracias por haber venido.*” (Thank you for coming.)

“And before I can speak,” Boyle continues, “the old man reaches into the pockets of his suit coat and retrieves two fistfuls of multicolored rose petals. He’s on the tips of his toes ... and he drops the petals over my head. He digs into his pockets again and manages two more fistfuls of petals. He does this again and again, and the stores of red, pink, and yellow rose petals seems infinite. I just stand there and let him do this, staring at my own sandals, now moistened with my tears covered with rose petals. Finally, he takes his leave and I’m left there alone, with only the bright aroma of roses.”

Boyle concludes, “For all the many, many times I would return to the village and see the same villagers, over and over, I never saw the old man again.”

I heard the voice, I felt the presence, I saw the movement. I smelled the roses. I know that he is alive.

Forty-five years ago during the throws of the Vietnam war several South Vietnamese civilians ... men, women and children ... huddled close in their pagoda seeking shelter from the raging war outside. But then came the planes, then came the napalm and then came the fire that consumed their dwelling killing many of them instantly and sending one of them, a nine year old girl, Kim Phuc, badly burned, running for her life. Many of us remember the picture of her running in terror and tears, along with other children, out of her village and down the road. For years she continued to run. Her life has been running. From months in the hospital to years in an orphanage to a time in Cuba to political exile in Newfoundland to the refuge and hospitality of some Canadian Quakers. I don’t know where

and when it happened, but somewhere along the way, amidst the confusion and the shadows of her life amidst the unbearable pain and fear --- the Risen One appeared. The risen Christ appeared. Somewhere along the way she heard his voice, felt his presence, saw his movement. It may explain how this victim of war could stand in, of all places, the American Vietnam War Memorial, as she did years ago and said “I forgive you.” Oh, I suppose you could bring the evidence of her life to court ... the pictures and the scars ... and get a jury to say about that day there is no God. But she knows better. Startled and staggering from the shadows of the cemetery of her own life, she preaches her sermon. I have heard the voice. I have felt the presence. I have seen the movement. I have seen the Lord.

And that, my friends, is what Easter is about, right? Amidst the darkness of the shadows. Pools of tears in our eyes. Startled and even confused. Despite even evidence to the contrary. In the end it’s here. It’s in here. It holds up in here. We have heard the voice. Felt the presence. Seen the movement. He is alive. We have seen the Lord.



Beyond the Shadows of Doubts

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