

WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION

By Roelf L. Ruffner

“To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

The core of the mountain of evidence for New Testament Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Like a crest of a mighty wave the indisputable conclusion of the Holy Bible is that Jesus was executed and arose three days later from the dead (cf. Luke 24:44-46). Though ancient Palestine was in the backwaters of the known world, this seminal event would run like a spiritual and intellectual tsunami through that world touching every life in it. Approximately thirty years later the Apostle Paul before a distinguished audience of Gentile notables and Jewish leaders in Caesarea, including Roman Procurator Porcius Festus, King Herod Agrippa II and Princess Bernice of Cilicia, said of Jesus’ resurrection: “For the king knoweth these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things is hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26).

But that evidence was authenticated by eye-witnesses of the risen Christ. Some of those witnesses which the New Testament records are surprising.

The Angels

Angelic beings were witnesses of the resurrection. One or two angels are mentioned at the sepulcher (Mk. 16:5; Mat. 28:2-4). Two angels were present after the Lord ascended into heaven (Acts 1:10-11). Angels were keenly aware of what was going on: “...which things the angels desire to look into” (1 Pet. 1:12). With joy they told Mary Magdalene and the women at the tomb that Sunday morning, “He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead...” (Mat. 28:6-7).

The Roman Guards

Pilate had assigned Roman guards to watch the sealed sepulcher of Jesus at the request of the Jewish council (Mat. 27:62-66). Some of them or their comrades may

have been present when Jesus was shamefully treated after His arrest and scourging (Mt. 27:27-30; John 19:1-4). Perhaps they prodded Him along as He made that final trip to Calvary. Others may have been at His crucifixion, gambling for his garments and fulfilling Old Testament prophecy (John 19:23-24) All witnessed the darkness and the earthquake that accompanied Jesus' death (Mat. 27:54). These guards were there when the Angel of the Lord came at dawn and rolled away the stone from that empty tomb on that glorious Sunday morning. "And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men" (Mat. 28:4). One can only imagine the terror that filled the hearts of these burly, battle-hardened, often superstitious soldiers. The Jewish leaders paid off the guards to keep them silent (Mat. 28:11-15). But how long did their silence last? A Roman watch consisted of four men over a 12 hour period. So there were at least four men assigned to guard Jesus' sepulcher.

What did the Centurion think; the one who witness His death? "Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God" (Mat. 27:54). Surely he knew of the guards at the sepulcher and their experience. SOMEONE told Matthew about their reaction and he and the Holy Spirit recorded it for the ages. Did it eventually get back to Caesar in Rome? Years later Paul would write, "And all the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household" (Phi. 4:22).

James

Paul records that Jesus made a special appearance to his half-brother James, after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7). There was some disbelief among Jesus' siblings during His ministry (cf. John 7:2-8). At his crucifixion Jesus amazingly bestowed the care of His mother Mary to the apostle John and not to one of His brothers, who seemed to be absent (John 19:25-27). It must have been an overwhelming experience for James to witness His resurrected brother – His Lord. He would later be assembled with the disciples in Jerusalem after Jesus Ascension (Acts 1:14). Was he among the 3,000 that were buried with Christ in the watery grave of baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12) on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 in Jerusalem? He later would be listed as one of the "pillars" of the church of Christ in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9). And, of course James would write the New Testament book bearing his name. "James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ..." (James 1:1).

Jesus' resurrection shook up the ancient world of the New Testament. The reports of over 500 witnesses (1 Cor.15:6) as well as the ones mentioned in this brief article must have made an impact. Ancient Judaism was smitten at its roots (Mat. 3:10; Acts 23:1-9). Paganism was left in the dust by the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 17:29-32). To this very day the resurrection of the Lord strikes at the very core of our brief existence. If Jesus rose from the dead then...many idols tumble (1 Cor.15:12-19). What idols has Jesus brought down in your life? Have you submitted to Him as the resurrected Lord (John 20:26-30)? Jesus is either Lord of all or He is Lord of nothing. "Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?" (John 11:23-26). I believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day.