

RELIABLE WITNESSES

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These are challenging times. Easter seems far off. After a long weekend of celebrations with family and friends six weeks ago, normalcy returned quickly. The smell of death has come again. Wars like that in Ukraine are still being fought. Flood waters rise even as wildfires rage. Inflation is resistant while the efforts to reduce it hurt the most vulnerable. The homeless still look for a bed at night and the disabled are challenged by a world not made for them. And Easter is left behind almost forgotten.

It is easy to forget that Christ is risen. So easy to forget the promise of Easter, of new life, of eternal life. So easy to forget John's words, "I have written this to you who already believe in the name of God's Son so that you may be quite sure that, here and now, you possess eternal life."¹

One of the startling things I learned from John's writings, his Gospel and his letters, is that in his understanding everlasting life, eternal life, is not confined to the hereafter, to life after death, to the future. Eternal life is not merely an extension of biological existence but transcends our ordinary experience of life right now. It is qualitatively different from human existence as we know it. The life promised after death is a continuation, a completing, a fulfillment of eternal life here and now.

But how do we continue to experience that new life, that exhilaration, that joy when we first believed, that Easter joy? How do we sustain the Easter shout, "Christ is risen!" when so much witnesses against it? Which witnesses are reliable? Is it possible in these normal, ordinary, everyday times to receive and experience extraordinarily deep and yet transcendent life?

Easter, Luke says, is not just shouting; Easter is also waiting, waiting for the coming of the promised Spirit, waiting for the fulfillment of Easter at Pentecost.

I want to remind you of comments I have made in the past. You will recall that the writer we call Luke wrote two books in the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. If you go through those two books and highlight the references to the Spirit of God you find something fascinating. In the Gospel of Luke the Spirit of God is intimately involved in the Jesus' conception and birth, his baptism and his wilderness testing, and then the Spirit vanishes. There are no further references. Throughout the ministry of Jesus, while Jesus is with us in body, the Spirit is absent.²

The Spirit then reappears again after Jesus has ascended to be with God. When Jesus is no longer with us in bodily form, the references to the Spirit reappear. At Pentecost the Spirit returns and never leaves. The disciples are filled and empowered as Jesus was filled and empowered to undertake God's ministry of love in the world.

In other words, at Pentecost everything comes full circle, and we are back again with baptism and the beginning of ministry. Over and over again, we see people coming to faith, being baptized, receiving the Spirit and going forth empowered to do ministry in love and service as Jesus had done it.

Henri Nouwen, the Roman Catholic theologian, spent most of his later life before he died living at Daybreak, the l'Arche community just north of Elgin Mills on Yonge Street. In that community Henri devoted his life to caring for the daily and constant needs of a profoundly physically and mentally challenged man. It was a life of service and love.

The Richmond Hill Ministerial, at the time I was minister at St. Matthew's United Church, had a number of opportunities to meet with Henri and to listen to his wise council. Henri's life was for the most part based on the writings of John. The centrepiece of his theology was found in John's Gospel, chapter 17. He summarized Jesus' theme this way. "What I have done, you will

do. What I have been, you will be.” The unity of Christ and his followers was more than symbolic - it was a handing on of the torch. They were to take his place. They were to become him.³ And so Jesus prays for them.

This prayer is at the end of what are called the Farewell Discourses; it is its conclusion. Already Jesus is preparing to depart the world; indeed, he is already leaving.⁴ He ends his final advice to his friends with a prayer, a prayer to God, but a prayer for them also.

For John then Easter is a time to listen to Jesus, to listen to him pray for us.

I never know how to read the prayer in John 17 properly in public worship. In the Revised Standard Version, it seems so formal, so high church, so liturgical, so priestly. We call it the High Priestly Prayer.

Today I chose to read from the translation of J. B. Phillips because its language seems more prayer-like, less formal, more personal. But then it feels as if I’m being intrusive, overhearing these words, eavesdropping on a private and personal time between Jesus and his disciples, spying. But these words are meant not just for the disciples but also for all the followers who would come and would become disciples themselves. Jesus prays that they might be reliable witnesses in order that we might become reliable witnesses ourselves.

When Judas betrayed Jesus and killed himself, a replacement needed to be found, someone to bring completeness and to enable them once again to symbolize faithfulness and the endurance of Jesus’ community.⁵

The key criterion was this: it had to be a reliable witness. It had to be someone who knew Jesus in the flesh, someone who was there from the beginning at Jesus’ baptism, someone who was part of the entourage, someone who could be trusted to become one of those who would bear witness to the resurrection, someone who had experienced the original Pentecost.

Two names were nominated Barsabbas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. Matthias was chosen.⁶

It was important that the witnesses who would bear testimony to the resurrection be from among those who were reliable witnesses, faithful and trustworthy.

However, it wasn't all that long and they were killed. They were martyred. Or they simply died. And the only people left were people like you and me, and as time progressed, and we became further and further removed from the first Easter, how do we know it's true? How do we know that the revelation, the truth, from Jesus has been faithfully transmitted? Is the tradition we have received trustworthy? Can we trust these rumours of resurrection? Are the witnesses reliable about this eternal life?

Yes, John says, you can trust the tradition you have received. His reasoning is this.

The apostles were given by God to Jesus.

Jesus gave them the word of God.

They received that word, believed it, and kept it.

They have not been corrupted by the world; they are not of the world, which, in fact, hated them.

Even though one of them, Judas, the son of destruction, had gone astray that was within God's knowledge and according to Scripture.

Just as Jesus sanctified himself and dedicated himself solely to God, so the disciples were consecrated, set aside, for truth.

And their sole purpose was that Jesus' mission received from God would continue.

The Church has not been orphaned.⁷ The Church is not the creation of a religious imagination, the frightened child of huddled rumours and popular superstitions. For those who need to examine the credentials of the Church's life and message, here is the truth's pedigree: from God, to Christ, to the apostles, to the Church, and out to every corner of God's world.⁸

We then can trust the message. It is reliable. We then can know in our hearts, we can trust our own testimony, the testimony of the Spirit to us directly that we have already received extraordinary, transcendent, eternal life given by God in and through the Son to all who believe. We may be quite sure that here and now we have eternal life. And we can become ourselves reliable witnesses.

We, you and I, are part of the continuing, faithful, trustworthy tradition that follows the Twelve apostles, the original reliable witnesses: Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, Judas the Son of James and Matthias. Together we are witnesses. From us, others will overhear what we truly believe, what we really pray for, and they will see how we live and the quality of our lives. And it is my hope that what others learn from me and from you is that we are indeed reliable witnesses to the Easter resurrection, to Pentecost's coming Spirit, and to eternal life being lived here and now.

"I am not praying only for these," Jesus continued, "but for all those who will believe in me through their message, that they may all be one."⁹ That means you and me. May we all be united as Reliable Witnesses to God's Easter word of eternal life through Christ. Amen.

¹ 1 John 5: 13.

² I noted that Luke's Gospel and the book we call the Acts of the Apostles are really part 1 and 2 of one work by the same author.

³ Jim Taylor, *Aha!!!* April-June 1997, Vol. 6, # 3, p. 21.

⁴ John 17: 11, 13.

⁵ In Biblical thinking the number 12 is important. There were 12 tribes of Israel. It's a number representing wholeness and the fullness of time.

⁶ Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26.

⁷ Cf. John 14: 18.

⁸ Craddock *et.al.*, *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, Trinity Press International, 1993, pp.277-278.

⁹ John 17: 20.