“YOU ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS”

Luke 24:1–53

Key Verse: 24:48

“You are witnesses of these things.”

Honestly, it’s hard to believe in the resurrection of Jesus or the resurrection of our bodies. Why? It’s because in our human experience nobody ever dies and then is raised to life again. We never see it happen. But, along with his death on the cross for our sins, the resurrection of Jesus is the key pillar of the Christian faith. If we take out his resurrection, there’s no gospel, no good news (1Co15:12–19). The Bible promises that when we believe in Jesus who rose again, we, too, will be raised with him (e.g. Jn11:25,26; Ro8:11; 1Th4:14). But how can we really believe this? Luke, who wrote this Gospel account, was a highly-educated man, shown in his advanced level of writing in Greek. He didn’t ignore intelligent people’s questions or doubts; he wanted to present an orderly account of Jesus, to help people believe (1:3,4). So, in this final chapter Luke carefully describes details surrounding Jesus’ resurrection. There is material evidence. There is human evidence—eyewitnesses. And there is spiritual evidence—the word of God. God doesn’t expect us to believe in the resurrection with a blind leap of faith, or just because people are telling us to. Amazingly, God has preserved various kinds of evidence on which we can base our faith.

In this account, Luke also shows us what happens to people when they finally believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Usually, we think of how resurrection faith benefits us personally—giving us courage, hope, peace or joy. But Luke wants us to see that believing Jesus’ resurrection, by definition, makes us his witnesses. When we believe his resurrection, we join with all the others, from the first eyewitnesses down to all the witnesses all around the world in history. God really wants witnesses with faith in Jesus’ resurrection to help others believe.

Luke dedicates the main section of his account to describing the Risen Jesus’ encounter with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Only Luke among the Gospel writers tells us about this. They were not among the Twelve; they were ordinary disciples. No one even seemed to notice when they left. But the Risen Jesus spent time walking with them, listening to them, explaining from Scripture, and helping them believe. It tells us that to Jesus, ordinary believers really matter, they’re so important, and helping them believe and in turn become his witnesses is the most important work in the world. Jesus says to them all, “You are witnesses of these things.” In a sense, the entire salvation work of God for the whole world was depending on them. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Read verses 1–3. These were the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee. Verse 10 lists some of their names. These women always were there with Jesus and his disciples, helping to support them out of their own means (8:1–3). In that male-dominant society, women were treated as unimportant. But Luke shows that Jesus included these women as his closest friends and helpers. When Jesus was crucified, these women stood near his cross, watching (23:49). They saw how he died (23:46), and how Joseph of Arimathea took his body down, wrapped it in linen cloths and placed it in a tomb (23:55). Afterwards, they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But since it was the Sabbath, they had to wait until early Sunday morning to go to the tomb to care for his body (23:56). When they get to the tomb, they first find that the stone that had sealed the entrance shut had been rolled away. They also find that there is no body of Jesus. These are the first two pieces of material evidence for the resurrection.

Read verse 4. These two men were angels. Their clothes that gleamed like lightning reflected the glory of heaven. It was the same glory Jesus had when he was transfigured on the mountain (9:29). These women had always been serving, and now they’d come to serve again, but God sent these angels from the glory of heaven to minister to and serve these women (Heb1:14). How did they respond? They were freaked out by their clothes, so they bowed down with their faces to the ground (5a). Then the angels asked them a powerful question: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (5b) They meant that Jesus is not dead; he’s living. But their question also addresses what we all can mistakenly do. Many people spend a lot of time grieving over someone who died, trying to bring them back to life. Women especially have the tendency to become sorrowful about someone’s death. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 says, “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” Those who die, believing in Jesus, do not really die; their death is like a sweet sleep until Jesus comes again. The Bible says we have a living hope for those who die in Christ (1Pe1:3,4). So, when a loved one who is a believer dies, we shouldn’t become overwhelmed by the power of death, looking for the living among the dead. We especially shouldn’t be sorrowful about the death of Jesus.

Read verses 6–8. “He is not here; he has risen!” Jesus body wasn’t stolen by enemies; God raised him from the dead. His missing body was not bad news, but good news. The angels remind the women of Jesus’ words: “The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.” This wasn’t some obscure prediction of Jesus. In fact, he told his followers about his upcoming death and resurrection three times (9:22,44; 18:31–33). Obviously, the women had been there with Jesus, listening to him, too. If they had heard Jesus say it so plainly and so repeatedly, why couldn’t they remember his words now? Partly it was because they didn’t want it to happen, and partly, because they’d been traumatized by his crucifixion, overwhelmed by the power of death. The angels helped the women spiritually, not by offering them human sympathy, but by helping them remember the words of Jesus. Still, the best way to help people spiritually is to help them remember the words of Jesus. Above all, Luke is giving us the spiritual evidence of the resurrection: Jesus had predicted it, and his words came true. It means we can believe the resurrection of Jesus based on the words of Jesus. We don’t need to have an extraordinary spiritual experience; we just need to believe what Jesus said.

Read verse 9. This is the third kind of evidence for the resurrection that Luke gives us: the human evidence of eyewitnesses. It’s notable that the first eyewitnesses of the resurrection were women. They told the truth of what they had seen and heard. But how did the men respond? Read verse 11. Then as now, the men had a hard time listening to women, because men’s common sense idea is that women’s words can’t be trusted. Men tend to tune women out. Not wise. And in this case, it was a big mistake. Read verse 12. Surprisingly, Peter took the women’s words seriously enough to take action and actually go and check out the tomb. There he found another material evidence of the resurrection: the strips of linen lying by themselves. Why are these strips of linen evidence of the resurrection? If grave robbers had come to steal his body, it would have been weird for them to spend time carefully taking off the strips of linen; they would have just run off with the body quickly. But the strips of linen looked as if Jesus himself had gotten up and taken them off. The strips of linen lying there are part of the good news of the resurrection, but Peter still couldn’t understand. It tells us that material evidence alone is not enough to truly believe the resurrection of Jesus.

Read verses 13,14. These two men were among the followers of Jesus. They may have been among the seventy-two Jesus had sent out two by two (10:1ff.) They heard the women’s news that morning about the empty tomb (22,23). They also heard Peter’s report about the strips of linen (24). But they couldn’t understand it all, either. Now they were leaving Jerusalem and going back to their home in Emmaus, seven miles away. Probably they were afraid to stay in Jerusalem where Jesus’ enemies were. Though they’d been his disciples, now that Jesus had been crucified, they lost their meaning and direction. But they were not walking in silence; they were still “talking about everything that had happened” (14). They were still yearning to understand.

Read verse 15. Even when their thinking was wrong, when they thought all was lost, when they were going in the wrong direction, Jesus went after them, in person. He considered them important in God’s plan and was ready to spend all afternoon on a seven-mile, on-foot journey, talking with them. How did he get started? Read verse 17. Their response is notable: “They stood still, their faces downcast.” This detail shows how discouraged they were. Then one of them, Cleopas, began to speak up: “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” (18) Jesus plays dumb and says, “What things?” (19a) Then they both chime in like children: “About Jesus of Nazareth. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people” (19b). In modern terms they meant, “Jesus is awesome!” Through his powerful words and deeds Jesus had captured their hearts and inspired their hopes and dreams. But now it’d all come crashing down. Read verse 20. It was too hard to understand how God could allow such a person as Jesus to be crucified. Then we hear perhaps their most poignant words. Read verse 21a. Jesus had given them hope that God could redeem Israel from Roman oppression. But now that he was crucified, their human hope was crushed. How hard to have our hopes crushed! Then they talked about what had happened that morning. In verse 23 they say that the women “didn’t find his body” and in verse 24, that the men who went to the tomb “did not see Jesus.” Again, the material and human evidence of the resurrection were not enough.

Read verses 25–27. Here the mysterious stranger explains to them that the Messiah’s suffering and death were part of God’s plan all along. God had predicted all throughout the Old Testament the things that would happen. Genesis 3:15, Psalm 16, Psalm 22, Psalm 69, and Isaiah 53, among many others, predicted it. It is amazing that so many Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is further spiritual evidence of the resurrection—not only Jesus’ words, but the words of Scripture all throughout the Old Testament. To have resurrection faith, we need to read these words in the Bible and learn how they were fulfilled in Jesus. To understand the meaning of his resurrection, we need to read and understand God’s words.

Read verse 28. Jesus who’d been walking with them all along and teaching them was still like a stranger to them, because until now they had been “kept” from recognizing him (16). Now Jesus is about to continue on the road without them. Why is he doing that? It’s to see how interested they really are. It’s a crucial point. Jesus still reveals himself only to those who’re really interested. Read verse 29. These two knew the man with them was tired and the sun was setting, so they urged him to stay at their home. Luke often emphasizes the importance of hospitality, repeating the word “welcome” often (8:40; 9:5,11,48,53; 10:8,10; 15:2; 16:4,9; 19:6). In this case, their hospitality becomes an opportunity for them to make a great spiritual discovery. Read verses 30,31. They finally recognized that it was Jesus. It was especially in the way he somehow broke the bread (35). When he suddenly disappeared, what did they say? Read verse 32. Clearly, Bible study with Jesus wasn’t boring. And they weren’t zoning out; they were totally engaged. Jesus spoke from Scripture in a way that stirred their hearts in the deepest places. Initially, their faces had been downcast (17b). But now, Bible study with Jesus set them on fire. What did they do with that fire? Look at verse 33a. Though it was late, they went right back to Jerusalem, seven miles away, to be with the others. They had a sense that something amazing was about to happen. They weren’t wandering anymore, but had real conviction and a sense of direction. And in fellowship with the others, their experience that Jesus was alive was confirmed as true (33b,34). These two, though not the Eleven, got to share their story (35). They became additional human evidence of Jesus’ resurrection: they became eyewitnesses who had met him in person.

Read verse 36. This time Jesus came to them all. He brought to these traumatized people, God’s peace. Initially they were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost (37). Read verses 38–40. Jesus helped them see the places in his hands and feet where the nails had been driven, and that he really did have flesh and bones. Combined with the empty tomb and the strips of linen, it’s even more persuasive material evidence of his resurrection. Read verses 41–43. Now they couldn’t believe it, not because they were startled and frightened, but, it says, “because of joy and amazement” (41). It tells us that these followers didn’t invent Jesus’ resurrection out of their emotional or psychological needs; he came to them in person, and then went on to further proof. Eating a piece of broiled fish is the last material evidence, and perhaps the most convincing. It really was Jesus in the flesh, in risen form, and they all saw it (cf. Ac10:41).

Then Jesus supplemented the material evidence of his resurrection with deeper Bible study. Read verses 44–45. As we’ve seen, Jesus repeatedly had been telling them about his suffering, death and resurrection, and that it all was part of Scripture being fulfilled (9:22,44; 18:31–33; 22:37). Each time, they’d not understood what he meant (9:45; 18:44). But now God finally opened their minds to understand. We all still need God’s help to really understand what Jesus’ death and resurrection means. This understanding is key in being used by God.

Read verses 46–48. We especially learn in verse 47 that the main thrust of the message is “repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Jesus suffered, died and rose again to restore our relationship with God. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we no longer are doomed to live in a broken relationship with God; we can have all our sins forgiven! When God gives us his forgiveness of sins through Jesus, we can come back to his eternal kingdom, just like the criminal next to Jesus on the cross. All we need to do is repent. Repentance is another major theme in Luke (3:3,8; 5:32; 10:13; 11:32; 13:3,5; 15:7,10; 17:3,4). What does it mean to repent? In Hebrew, it mainly meant to turn around, to change one’s direction. To repent means to turn from sin and self to God. No matter who we are, if we repent and put our faith in Jesus, we receive forgiveness of sins in his name (Ac2:38; 5:31). This forgiveness of sins from God heals our souls. Jesus said in verse 47 that this good news is for people “of all nations” (cf. 2:10,32a; Ac13:47; 26:18,23). It’s available to anyone: any social class, any race, any religious background, any sexual orientation, moral or immoral, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, successful or failing. There’s no one who should be written off; anyone can receive this good news. All we need do is repent and put our trust in Jesus.

Read verse 48 again. In one sense these people were unique, historical witnesses whose testimony all of Christianity relies on (Ac1:8; 13:31; cf. Eph2:20; 3:5; 1Pe5:1). But in another sense, every faithful, reliable believer is meant to be a witness of Jesus (2Ti2:2). But how can we live as his witnesses? Read verse 49. It’s only when we receive the power of the Holy Spirit that we can truly live as his witnesses.

In verses 50–53 Luke records Jesus’ ascension into heaven. When his followers witnessed it, they worshiped Jesus and returned to where Jesus told them to go, with great joy, praising God. What a beautiful ending!

Today we learned that God has given us much evidence for Jesus’ resurrection, to help us believe. We especially saw that we can understand the meaning of his death and resurrection only through the Scriptures being opened to us. And we saw God’s purpose to make us witnesses of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Even ordinary people like the two men on the road to Emmaus are so important in God’s salvation work. May God work in our hearts to live as Jesus’ witnesses and bring his good news in some way to all the people we encounter each day.