

sermon-4/12/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Easter at Cornelius’ House”
Acts 10:34-43
By Jim Patten

Normally we gather at the empty tomb on Easter Sunday. Easter is all about the resurrection. It makes sense, then to gather with the disciples and Mary at the empty tomb. We did that, actually, today when we read the gospel of John’s version of that first Easter Sunday.

It is a great Easter text, one of my favorites. We read about Peter racing the other disciple to the tomb. We hear how the risen Christ appears out of the blue, incognito, as it were. Mary mistakes him for the gardener. We wonder how this could be, since it has not been all that long since she had seen Jesus. How could she not recognize him? Where did he get the gardener’s clothes?

And we read that very touching section in John’s story where Mary finally recognizes the risen Christ when he calls her by name. When Christ calls out Mary’s essence, signified by her name, she recognizes him and Easter happens for her.

All of that is powerful and great fun. But today Easter will take place in a far different place. We are going to gather at Cornelius’ house this morning. We heard part of that story when our Acts passage was read.

By changing where we gather we also change our focus. We are not going to be looking at what happened that first Easter. That is probably beyond what we can know. We certainly won’t have all our questions answered about the physical aspects of resurrection.

Instead, we will be looking at what the resurrection means for our lives today. How do we experience resurrection in the midst of our complicated world, our sophisticated cynicism, and our busy lives?

Acts, chapter ten, is a good place to start that discussion. As scholars note, this chapter in Acts, along with the next one, is all about conversion. There are two conversions going on here. The first is rather obvious. Cornelius is being converted to Christianity. He was a devout man who revered God, but now he is going to be someone who understands God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

For Cornelius, an important Roman centurion, to be converted by a Jew, by some little peon in this backwater occupied country, it must have taken great humility. It is an amazing conversion, to be sure. But it pales in comparison to the other conversion in this story.

I am talking about Peter’s conversion. Peter was a Jewish man in an occupied country. Being a good Jew, he had very strict notions about what was kosher, what was ritually

clean. A Roman centurion was most certainly not kosher! Cornelius also represented the hated enemy.

First Peter has a dream where God speaks to him about what is clean and what is not. This dream completely blows apart Peter's little religious world. It would be like an Amish person having a dream telling him that driving a car is not against his religion, only that does not capture how shattering Peter's dream was for his religious worldview. Maybe it would be like the time Whitworth College, formerly a strict Presbyterian evangelical college in Spokane, finally allowed dancing on campus. That hardly captures the change Peter went through. Perhaps it is more like some of us today finally realizing God is bigger than any one religion, even Christianity.

We cannot overestimate the change that happens in Peter because of his dream and what follows. He ends up going to a Gentile's home and staying with him for several days. That would mean he would need to eat the Gentile's food. Peter's religious prejudices were being broken right and left in this encounter with Cornelius.

Perhaps the biggest prejudice that is transformed in his life is the one that said one must become a Jew first before becoming a Christian. After all, Jesus was a Jew. How in the world could one become a Christian, a follower of Jesus, without understanding all the scriptures that formed Jesus' life, without being immersed in the Jewish worldview?

Apparently God was bigger than Judaism. God would no longer fit in the little box Peter made for God. Peter was being transformed. And the first sermon he preaches in the midst of this transformation is recounted right here in our passage for today. Interestingly, this will be the last missionary speech we hear from Peter in the Bible.

The first thing to notice in this sermon is its brevity. Modern day preachers could sure learn a lot from this short sermon. It is brief, but it packs a punch. The second thing to notice is what he does not say.

This is Peter's attempt to bring a Gentile into Christianity. You would think Peter would want to mention the crucial facts about Jesus and Christianity. Look again at what he says. There is no mention of Jesus' birth or the fact that it was a virgin birth. There is no Son of God language used for Jesus. There is not even any talk about Jesus dying for our sins on the cross. Totally missing is any mention of our needing to be washed in the blood of the lamb, Jesus paying the price we owed for our sins, or God's righteous anger, intended for us, being absorbed by Jesus.

What is present? Peter concludes that as long as one fears God and does what is right he or she is acceptable to God. He is not saying we earn God's salvation by doing what is right. That is works righteousness and very problematic. He is saying God is a whole lot more interested in those who are willing to bow in worship and those who see ethics as central to what they believe, than God is interested in those who believe all the right things, or who are part of the in crowd, religiously speaking.

A central phrase in this text is this: “God shows no partiality.” Jesus, the one sent by God to bring peace, is “Lord of all.” Jesus is not just for Jews. This Jesus came doing good and healing all those who were alienated from God because of evil. Those in power who were oppressing the people did not like this so they killed him.

The end result is that any who believe in the name, in the essence of Jesus, experience forgiveness of sins. Perhaps a better word for believe is trust. In fact several English translations of this text use trust rather than believe. Those who trust that God’s grace and love was revealed in Jesus can experience healing from all that is broken in them, can experience forgiveness, can experience salvation, in other words.

The resurrection was God’s “yes” to Jesus. The disciples, who witnessed the resurrection, became bold witnesses to the good news they experienced in Jesus’ presence.

Resurrection was not only God’s “yes” to Jesus. It unleashed the power of the Holy Spirit transforming lives, shattering prejudices, and bringing into one community those who formerly could not even eat together.

Those of us who celebrate Easter can’t help but ask ourselves some pretty challenging questions. One commentator listed a few: “Who is God inviting to God’s table, and thus to our tables as well? Who, from outside of our communities, is God pushing us toward? With whom in our own communities is God challenging us to be reconciled? Where are forgiveness and restored fellowship needed in our lives and the lives of others?”

Some of those questions scare me to death! I can think of a whole host of people within our own Presbyterian denomination who hold their faith so differently than do I, who I am not sure I want to sit with at the same table. Sometimes it is a whole lot easier and more satisfying to nurture old hurts than to do the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Sometimes it is a lot more fun just sticking with the culture’s celebration of Easter than it is to give ourselves to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit unleashed after the resurrection.

Herb O’Driscoll, as he often does, sums up the meaning of Easter for us. He writes, “If I believe that Jesus has transformed the human nature that I share with him, then my human nature is redeemed from its own brokenness and shortcomings. In spite of who and what I am, I am acceptable to a loving God. If this is true, then I become acceptable to myself. When this happens in our lives, dawn breaks, burdens are lifted, joy is possible, peace reigns.”

Celebrating Easter at Cornelius’ house brings that reality home. Happy Easter. Amen