

### **“Everyone Who Believes” – Acts 10:34-43 – Easter Sunday 2008**

Easter Sunday morning! Glorious highlight of the Christian year! A day of great celebration and joy. But how is it that we, a motley – but lovable, mind you – gang of non-Jews, two millennia and half a planet away, can join in the celebrations of this day? How is it that we can barge in on the celebrations about a somewhat obscure and definitely confusing rabbi in the Middle East two thousand years ago? Part of the answer to those questions lies in our reading from Acts, a recap of Peter’s speech to a bunch of curious people.

It can’t have been easy. Not as easy as it sounds in Luke’s account in Acts. It can’t have been easy for Peter to stand before this particular group of people, and tell the story of Jesus from start to finish. Oh, sure, he had been invited to speak, and even invited to deliver “all that the Lord has commanded you to say”, but it can’t have been easy.

After all, as far as we know, this was the first time Peter had even associated with a group like this. Here he stands before a group of Gentiles, relatives and close friends of an officer in the Italian Cohort. Let’s go back a bit and see how this event came together.

Peter’s audience had been called together by the officer, a man named Cornelius. Apparently this Cornelius was a devout man, who feared God with all his household, who gave generously in charity to the people, and who prayed constantly to God. And his prayers were not in vain, because God sent him a messenger, an angel, who told Cornelius that his prayers and good works had “ascended as a memorial before God”. Furthermore, this good Roman citizen and officer was to send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who also went by the name Peter – and he did, send them that is.

Meanwhile, back in Joppa, while Cornelius was hearing God’s message in a vision, Peter dozed off on a rooftop while waiting for lunch to be ready (I can relate!) and had a strange vision of his own. Peter’s vision was of a large sheet being lowered from heaven by the four corners to the ground, and the sheet was full of four-footed creatures, and reptiles, and birds – all about as clean and available to eat as fresh roadkill to a devout Jew like Peter. He couldn’t even blame the vision on the pizza or bad wine, because he was still waiting for lunch! And to top it off, a voice commanded Peter to “get up, kill and eat!”

Needless to say, Peter was horrified. His whole faith experience had been devoted to keeping the laws of purity, of observing with great devotion the detailed rules of the covenant set forth in scripture. And here on this rooftop in Joppa he was being commanded to violate all his learning and practice, by God. Peter was horrified, and burst out, “No way, Lord!”, to which God replied, “Yes, Way! What I have made clean, you must not call profane.” Three times they went round that circle, and then “that thing was yanked back up into heaven.”

Peter was puzzled about this – I guess he would have been! However, as he was working it through, trying to make some sense of it, the delegation from Cornelius arrived, asking for him by name. But it still took the Holy Spirit telling him directly that three men were at the gate looking for him and to go with them at once for Peter to catch on what was happening. He invited them in to stay the night, and the next day set out with them. Cornelius met him when he arrived, and Peter discovered a huge crowd assembled. He told them that even though it was illegal for him to associate with or even visit a Gentile, God had shown him that he should not call anyone profane or unclean, and asked them what they wanted from him, to which they replied that all of them were there in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say. No pressure there, Peter!

Now I suspect that what we have in Acts is a summary of what Peter said – that when he was asked later what he said to the assembled crowd of Gentiles Peter probably replied, “well, I just told them the whole story”, and the whole gospel story is summarized here. Beginning with the baptism that John announced, Peter recounted the stories of the anointing of Jesus with power by God, his ministry of doing good and healing, until he was put to death by hanging on a tree. Peter also recounted the resurrection story, how God raised Jesus on the third day and allowed him to appear to selected witnesses who ate and drank with him. Of course those were only the highlights of the story, and I’m sure that Peter elaborated at length about the details, the wonder, the awe, the mystery, the joy.

We should note, however, that the summary of his sermon is wrapped with several very important interpretations. Peter began with a declaration that “God knows no favorites”. The Jewish faith held that God was impartial as a judge, could not be bribed or bought, and would listen equally to the poor as to the rich, to widows and orphans as to the advantaged in society. This view of God continued to be held in early Christianity. The consequence of such impartiality is God’s universal concern for all humanity, and Peter pointed this out several times. In the Christian confession he emphasizes the universality – “Jesus Christ, he is the Lord of *all*”. Peter pointed out that Jesus went about doing good and healing *all* who were possessed. Most strongly, the sermon concludes with “everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name”. Not some, not just the people of Israel, or Judea, or Jerusalem, or even Samaria, but everyone who believes, receives forgiveness of sins.

There must have been those who believed, for the most amazing thing happened – even as Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. Needless to say, the Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded – how could this be, that the Spirit was poured out even on Gentiles?! That it had happened was apparent, for these Gentile believers, newly baptized in the Spirit were speaking in tongues and praising God. Recognizing the importance of what had just happened, Peter called for the new Gentile believers to also be baptized with water in the name of Jesus Christ, and defying completely the laws of separation and purity remained with them several days.

That’s the longer version – the summary is that God made Peter aware that the death and the resurrection of Jesus had made the Gentiles clean as well, and that the grace of God, the Spirit of God was not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles as well. In an understanding that would be echoed by Paul as “there is no longer Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free, but all persons are equal in Christ”, Peter came to know that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins in his name. Not a select few, not just those who believe hard enough, publicly enough, churchy enough; not only those who display their faith in public or praying on street corners – everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness in his name.

But the really important part of this episode for us was the reaction of the assembled Gentiles to the preached Word of God. They listened, they heard the gospel story of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and they responded. Those people heard the Word, believed, and in doing so received both forgiveness and the gift of life. They were dramatically changed by this profound event, and they were understandably excited, and excitedly they praised God.

Those new Gentile believers fade from sight at this point, but obviously they didn’t fade from faith, for they helped to spread the good news of redemption through Christ’s resurrection beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria unto the ends of the earth. They helped to proclaim the good news of the forgiveness available in Jesus’ name to people of all colours, all races, in all corners of the globe, and others also responded in belief, and in faith.

That good news of redemption, of reconciliation with God, of forgiveness of sins, of new life has reached even to here, and we hear this message, and we believe, and we in turn are changed just as the people assembled in Cornelius’ house were changed. Now it’s our turn to count ourselves as disciples of the risen Christ, and to eat and drink with him. Come, Lord Jesus, sit with us at your table, redeem and forgive us, feed us and fill us anew with pulsing, vibrant faith, guide and direct us as your disciples, help us to proclaim this new life through our own living.

This is the most exciting Sunday of the whole year – the Sunday of Sundays upon which we proclaim the rising again victorious over even death of our Lord, Jesus Christ, bringing us redemption, reconciliation, new life. Grasp hold of that excitement, let yourself be flooded with the Holy Spirit as you affirm, “I believe, help me in my unbelief.” Open yourself to the new life, the anticipation of years of joyfully finding meaning in serving Christ through accepting and serving others, and helping them through your belief to believe also, that they may also hear the good news, that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of their sins through his name.