

“WE ARE WITNESSES”

Acts 10:34-43

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This scripture from Acts is most commonly read in church as a supplemental reading on Easter Sunday, when of course it doesn't get as much attention as whichever of the gospel accounts of the resurrection is being read. But this sermon of Peter's is a rich and interesting text in itself, and merits some looking at.

We usually hear it – because it's mostly read at Easter – as one of those New Testament scriptures presenting additional evidence for the reality of Jesus' resurrection: Peter's eyewitness testimony that Jesus was raised from the dead, and not only appeared to him and to others of Jesus' disciples but ate and drank with them. But when you look at what Peter says there, the resurrection is just a part of what he's referring to when he says “we are witnesses.”

He also talks about Jesus being filled with the Spirit and power of God. He calls Jesus “Lord of all,” and says that “God was with him.” He describes Jesus as “preaching peace” and doing good. He talks about seeing all the things that Jesus did – we can imagine what Peter is picturing when he says this: Jesus healing people, feeding a crowd, telling stories, touching those others considered untouchable, talking with women, challenging the boundaries of what religion demanded, eating with folks the respectable people called “sinners.” He tells about Jesus being put to death by the powerful people who found his words and his ways too threatening to the status quo. And *then* he tells his audience that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that Jesus appeared. It's not simply a resurrection appearance or two Peter is speaking about when he says “we are witnesses.” It's all of this. It's a whole story – and more than a story: it's the person of Jesus, the truth he embodied, who he was.

As I was noticing this, I was remembering what Jerry said last week in his sermon for Easter Sunday, about the whole of Jesus' life and ministry being a demonstration of the “resurrected life.” Doesn't that sound like exactly what Peter is saying here? From the beginning, Jesus preached and taught and lived new life, imparted new life to the people he touched and healed and forgave and called. That's what Peter is talking about when he says, “we are witnesses.”

There's not one little bit of dry or abstract doctrine in Peter's sermon. We could take his words and turn them into a creed, I guess, but that would be to take the life out of them. Peter is not offering up a list of beliefs but a testimony to a life-changing, paradigm-shifting, soul-awakening journey he has been embedded in. He tells the story, in a simple and direct way. He describes what he and his friends experienced. And he shares what it all means to him. We could learn a lot from Peter about how to speak about our faith.

But there's more we should know about Peter's sermon, and that has to do with where and why he was giving it. You might have wondered about how he started it: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." This sermon is a watershed moment in the early church – a turning point. He has come to Caesarea at the request of a man named Cornelius. Peter doesn't know that Cornelius is a man who prays and tries to help people in need, and is on something of a spiritual search. Cornelius is a Roman, and not just any Roman but a commander in the much-feared Roman army that occupied Israel. He was not somebody Peter would normally have expected to associate with at all, let alone trust. He was an outsider – a Gentile, and therefore impure by the standards of Judaism – and an enemy besides.

But Cornelius has had a vision in which an angel told him to send a message to Joppa and invite a guy called Peter to come and talk to him.

In the meantime, Peter has had a strange vision of his own (you might want to go back later and read about it in the first part of the chapter) that challenges his deep-rooted beliefs about what is "clean" and "unclean," "holy" or "unholy." Peter resists the message at first, but three times he hears a voice say "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." He's still baffled as to what this is all about when Cornelius's messengers find him. So he comes to see Cornelius, and Cornelius gathers his family and friends to meet Peter, to hear what he has to say. And that's the context for this sermon which we usually put into the context of Easter. That's why Peter starts out by saying "I truly understand that God shows no partiality...." That is to say, "NOW I understand that strange vision. I understand something I didn't understand before."

This is a watershed moment because until now, the Christian movement had understood itself as a renewal movement within Judaism. The community was really growing, but it hadn't occurred yet to Peter and the other disciples that it might go far beyond the ethnic and religious bounds of Judaism. I suppose if they'd sat down and thought about the implications of Jesus' ministry and teachings, they could have predicted it, but the possibility that the message of Jesus could be for the Gentiles, too, posed an unexpected challenge. The idea that a Gentile could love God, want to follow Jesus, or become a part of the community of believers was so unimaginable that it meant a radical change of heart and mind. And that is exactly what we see happening to Peter in Acts 10.

What Peter is a witness to is not only the story of Jesus life, death, and resurrection. It's also this continued unfolding of the work of Christ in the world. It's the breaking down of religious, racial, and cultural barriers. It's the massive shift about to take place in the trajectory of the church's mission. *And* it's the personal shift in Peter's own attitude. What he is a witness to is not so much some facts or some dogmas but to the transformative power of the gospel.

I wondered a bit about the fact that Peter says "WE are witnesses." As far as I can tell, it's just him speaking. But I appreciate that he says "we," that he embeds himself in his community. It seemed clear to me at first that by "we" he meant, besides himself, James and John and Mary Magdalene and the others. As I thought more about the context of Peter's sermon, though, I

wondered if “we” might also mean Peter and Cornelius – two very different people together witnessing the opening up of the gospel story into a universal message of good news and inclusion.

Of course, what *we* have is not Peter and Cornelius’s experience, but a written account, and so the “we” of Acts 10 ultimately means us. WE are witnesses. Not of the same things Peter and his friends experienced as they walked the roads of Palestine with Jesus. Not of the world-changing upheavals the early church saw. But of the way the gospel continues to speak to us. Of the way it shapes our community of faith. Of the way it transforms us and changes our thinking and breaks down barriers and helps us see what God is doing in the world *now*. Peter’s sermon reminds us that the story of Jesus belongs to all who are willing to hear it, and not only those we are inclined to include. It reminds us that the Christian story isn’t a “thing of the past” but living good news that anchors the faith of each new generation. It reminds us to be attentive – and receptive - to what new directions God might have in mind for the church today.

What would *you* say about the story of Jesus? How would you tell someone what it means to you? or why it matters to the people with whom you share your faith journey? What can you say about the presence of Jesus in the life of the church? About the ways you see God at work in the world? About what new things God’s Spirit is trying to open our eyes to in our time? What do you know – what do *we* know? - about the power of the gospel to heal and transform?

I just know that you have *something* you could say. WE have something to say. Eloquence isn’t required here. Complete understanding isn’t required. An answer to every question isn’t required. Perfect saintliness isn’t required either (thank goodness!) Just the love of the story and an attentiveness to how it continues to live. We are witnesses. WE are witnesses. Amen.