

Sermon for Easter ~ Year C
Trinity Episcopal Church in Lawrence, Kansas
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue
April 4, 2010

Today and throughout the Easter season, we will read passages from a book that is rather neglected in the canon of scripture, the Acts of the Apostles. It is full of wonderful stories, intimate and touching stories of a great variety of people. St. Peter dominates the first part of the book and St. Paul the second half. In this first part we have several sermons attributed to St. Peter, and it matters little whether they express Luke's theology or Peter's. The writer Luke would not have known these truths had they not been revealed to him by the likes of Peter and of Paul. And no one would have heard or believed any of these stories had Jesus not risen from the dead.

Simon, called Peter, has had a vision that he did not understand. It coincided with a vision that a Roman military man -- of all people!-- had at the same time. The Roman's name was Cornelius, and he was a God-fearing man who was attracted by the God of Israel, but did not know what it all meant for him and for his family. He was merciful to the poor and was a man of prayer. During his prayer time an angel appeared to him and gave him directions to summon an unknown man, Simon, called Peter, who was staying with a tanner in Joppa. Cornelius obeyed his vision immediately.

Meanwhile, Peter was praying up on the flat roof of his host's house near the water. He was hungry and had asked for the food that was being prepared for him, since he intended to remain in prayer for a long while. In his hungry and trancelike state he was tempted by a vision of many animals, animals that were forbidden to the Jews as profane, dirty. He was confused by the dream, but he too obeyed the summons that came from Cornelius. He went to Caesarea to meet this strange centurion, and he was accompanied by several converted Jews.

As Peter spoke to the centurion, he saw that the centurion's house was full of relatives and guests who feared God and were waiting breathlessly for God's word to come to them from Peter's mouth. And it all became clear to Peter. He knew now what his vision had meant and he knew that he had been sent to this particular household for a reason. We are the beneficiaries of this understanding.

Up to that time, the Good News of Jesus Christ had been preached only to the Jews. But Peter began by confessing that he now understood that this was no longer the case. "God shows no partiality," he stated. The Greek word used originally to express this thought has a lot to do with the recognition of faces - that God does not accept anyone on just the appearance of his face. It doesn't matter, in other words, if the face is black, white, or brown. It doesn't matter, Peter realizes, if one is Gentile or Jew, and the realization stuns him. Even though the people he meets at the centurion's house are Romans, he is now ready to tell them about Jesus Christ, and he is delighted to do so.

The crucial words for us on this day are these: "We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." What more convincing testimony is there?

Peter has come a long, long way from the frightened man who denied his dearest friend and teacher when Jesus was arrested. After those encounters with the living Lord, and after assurance of forgiveness, Peter now speaks with confidence and goes out on a limb when he baptizes these new Gentile believers.

The Resurrection appearances transformed these disciples and they are now out transforming the world. Where does this leave us? We are members of the nations St. Peter mentions at the beginning of his sermon - "But in any nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him." What an inclusive message this is and how easily and disastrously it has been ignored through the ages. We are now chosen to hear the message and to see the face of the Resurrected Christ through Peter's witnessing.

On this Resurrection Sunday, we join with countless others to proclaim the truth of the Resurrection in words, in songs, in prayers. We are the most fortunate of people, Paul reminds us, when we believe in the risen Lord. Because without the Resurrection, he tells the Corinthians, we would indeed be the most miserable of people. Without the Resurrection, our faith makes no sense. With it, everything in creation falls into place.

The writer of the Epistle to the Colossians in the portion read today puts this in perspective. "For you have died," the Christians are told, "and your life is hidden with Christ in God." The Christian has died to the world. We are no longer concerned with transient things. Our life has been secured in the risen Christ and is hidden with Christ in God. How can we not rejoice?

No matter what burdens we brought with us to this day, the assurance rings forth that we belong to the risen Christ. God loves us enough to give us this assurance. Those who were witnesses to the Resurrection did not keep the Good News to themselves - they shared it and continue to share it with each one of us. Thanks be to God.