

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**April 9, 2023**

**Acts 10:34–48**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

O risen Christ, open us to the power of your resurrection as we hear it proclaimed this day. Enlighten our minds and kindle our hearts with the presence of your Spirit, that we may hear your words of comfort and challenge in the reading of the scriptures, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our scripture this morning comes from the books of Acts, which is the sequel to the Gospel according to Luke. Like the other Gospels, Luke tells the story of Jesus's life and ministry. It witnesses to his life, death, and resurrection. But the author of Luke didn't stop with the story of Jesus' life, the author continues the story. The book of Acts, also known as the Acts of the Apostles, chronicles the formation and growth of the early church – the community that follows Jesus. The story we will hear this morning is a sermon from Peter. Peter is at the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion.

This is unusual company. These are not people who would normally be associating with one another, a gentile soldier and a Jew. In fact, it is against Jewish law for them to be in a house together. Right before our story, both Cornelius and Peter have had separate but related visions. In his vision, Cornelius is told to send for Peter without much of an explanation other than God orders him to do so. Peter has a vision about foods that he should eat. The thing is the foods are not kosher, therefore, should not be eaten by Peter. But God tells Peter not to call unclean

those things that God has called clean. As Peter is pondering what this vision might mean, messengers from Cornelius knock on his door.

Peter arrives at the house of Cornelius and asks why Cornelius has sent for him. Cornelius recounts his vision and the command for Peter to come to his house. And then Cornelius says, “Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.” And then Peter begins to preach.

Then Peter began to speak to them, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 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. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So, he

ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

This is the first time on Easter Sunday that I have ever preached from the book of Acts. Before this, I have always, as most preachers I know do, selected the assigned Gospel reading for the day that recounts the story of the disciples going to the tomb only to find it empty and then to see the resurrected Jesus. Over the last several weeks, we have been following the Revised Common Lectionary, which assigns particular scripture passages for each Sunday. There is normally an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, a Gospel reading, and some other reading from the New Testament. Assuming I would preach from the Gospel lesson, I, nevertheless read the other assigned passages for today. As I did so, I was struck by this passage from Acts.

The thing that first captured my attention, was that, in a CliffsNotes “fashion, it relays the life of Jesus, his violent execution, his subsequent resurrection appearance, and his eminent role as judge.”<sup>i</sup> In a succinct and direct way, Peter provides a compelling and precise sermon on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He then ends his sermon with a call to action – and an invitation to trust and follow Jesus and to know that those listening are forgiven and given grace. It’s a remarkable sermon because the response from those listening is to become baptized and follow Jesus.

When I read the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s resurrection, I think sometimes I miss the urgency of what Jesus’ resurrection means for the world. The stories in the Gospel let me settle into it as a simple story told about back then. It becomes about a past event to remember. But this story with Peter and Cornelius feels more present tense.

Another thing that captured my attention is how Peter starts his sermon by declaring that God shows no partiality. God doesn’t play favorites.

Peter has traveled a long theological distance in a short time. It was just a few days ago when he was worried about what food was kosher and what was not. He was worried about boundaries and distinctions. And now he is ready to baptize a gentile soldier. This is a radical re-ordering of who is in and who is out. Who is declared acceptable. According to God, it doesn't matter where you were born, or who your family is, or what your nationality is. God plays no favorites, and all are invited to be a part of the community of Jesus.

This had to be a challenge for Peter. It re-ordered his entire understanding about boundaries and what it means to belong. The resurrection impacts power and identity. As one writer says, "Easter touches ethics. Taking the resurrected body of Jesus seriously leads to Peter to take the bodies of others seriously and privilege the reign of God over empire."<sup>ii</sup> This story points to the resurrection not as some story about the past, but as Jesus' resurrection impacting the world now.

"The Easter God is not a God who can be enclosed and narrated in a story about the past. God's Easter work is ongoing. This does not undermine the specificity and uniqueness of Easter morning. It simply refuses to treat that event like a 'ship in a bottle,' observed and analyzed, but carefully corked. Jesus lives, and God is still in the business of choosing "witnesses" to Jesus' resurrection life—apparently in unexpected places."<sup>iii</sup>

And that is another thing that captured my imagination with this story. The ongoing work of Jesus' resurrection requires witnesses. It requires faithful people to share the Good News and to invite others into the boundary-breaking work of resurrection. It calls us to re-order and re-orient ways of being that allow for the in-breaking of God's grace, mercy, and justice.

God actively intervened in human history in the person of Jesus. Jesus then called people to join him in his ministry. In turn, those people called others and formed communities to continue the ministry of God in the world.

Resurrection breaks the rules. Resurrection throws everything and everyone off balance. Resurrection turns otherwise tidy and orderly lives completely upside down. When God raised Jesus from the dead, it creates an entire new reality. It declares that goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death.

The resurrection, although breaking into history at a specific time and in a specific place, is not the property of the past. As God's future showing itself in our present, it belongs to all times and seasons. Jesus is alive, still showing up as a transfiguring presence in a world fraught with absences. Jesus is not over, and his story is not over. We are called to witness to this reality in the world now.

I believe resurrection isn't so much something to be believed, as much as it is to be hoped for and experienced, as something to participate in. Resurrection isn't something that happens just between our ears, it isn't assent to a particular understanding. To believe in resurrection requires faith and courage. It is about saying no to the power of darkness and death and destruction around us. Even in the face of the bad experiences we have, or the bad news we hear, resurrection is making the claim that through God, there is sustaining power in hope in the face of the bad.

Resurrection is about the healing and restoration of wounded and severed relationships; resurrection is about dismantling oppressive and unjust structures and systems; resurrection is proclaiming joy even in the midst of grief. Resurrection is about possibility and imagination.

Resurrection is about the beginning of the transfiguration and transformation of the world. Here and now.

If you have ever hoped for the impossible, you understand Easter and resurrection. If you have ever felt that you couldn't make it but have come out the other end, you understand Easter and resurrection. If you have faced injustice or oppression and said, "no more" than you have lived into resurrection. Even if you have had those moments where you cannot see the way ahead, or you are weary to the bone, but you keep going, keep holding out hope, you understand Easter and resurrection. Resurrection is about living into the hope and promise of God. It is to commit ourselves to the claim of resurrection and to new life for ourselves and for acts of reconciliation and love toward our neighbors. Claiming Easter allows us to live, move and have our being and to call attention to those resurrection moments and resurrection experiences around us. And who knows, maybe even in the midst of our speaking and acting, the Holy Spirit will surprise us and show us something we hadn't even thought possible before.

Happy Easter!

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed!

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord/commentary-on-acts-1034-43-22>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord/commentary-on-acts-1034-43-18>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord/commentary-on-acts-1034-43-18>