

## SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 9, 2021

ACTS 10:44-48 | PSALM 98 | 1 JOHN 5:1-6 | JOHN 15:9-17

We've been spending Easter exploring the relationship between beliefs and practices in Luke's Acts. So we've talked about how we practice *koinonia*, how we witness to others, how we read history, and how we join together with other people. And in every story, we've tried to uncover what Easter changes and what it makes possible.

And today we're going to wrap this up with a story about a man named Cornelius. For this story to make any sense, you have to remember that Jesus and his first disciples are all Jewish. And so we have some idea of what Easter means for Jews like them. But when these first believers are sent out to the world, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, it doesn't take long before they have to figure out what Easter means for Gentiles. Are Gentiles supposed to be a part of this community? If so, do Gentiles have to convert to Judaism to become part of this community? What happens if we bring in Gentiles, but then they end up becoming the majority of the people? Those are the questions they're dealing with in the early church, so that's the background for this story.

Cornelius, Luke tells us, lived in Caesarea and was a centurion of the Italian Cohort. This is Luke's way of telling us that Cornelius is not Jewish. He's a Gentile. But after a couple of visions, he and Peter end up meeting. The result is this very dramatic encounter between the Jewish community led by Peter and the Gentile community represented by Cornelius. And because this is the book of Acts, the story begins with Peter giving—what else—a very long speech about how Jesus has been raised from the dead. At some point, God seems to have had enough of it because, as Luke tells us, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word,” and they began to speak in tongues and extol God.

One way to make sense out of this story is by focusing in on the Gentiles. You can imagine a pretty good homily about how God's community is expansive and boundary-breaking, and how we are called to create those kinds of communities in the world today. Throw in some jokes, and you've got a real solid nine minutes of content.

But I want you to notice something else in here. Not the Gentiles who are making so much noise extolling God. But the reaction of these Jewish believers. They are completely overwhelmed by this activity which they infer must be the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us they were “astounded.” The King James translates it as “astonished.” The word Luke uses here is actually the same word he used to describe how Gentiles saw Jewish believers who received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost morning, which gives you some idea of the novelty of this moment.

This is not simply a story of Peter and his Jewish group witnessing to Cornelius and his Gentile group. But a story of witness going the other way, too. Peter and these Jewish believers, the people who are already a part of God's covenant community, are still being witnessed to and still being surprised by God. They are still learning, still discovering, and still exploring what it means to live in the light of the resurrection.

So Luke is leading us to reexamine exactly what a belief in the resurrection is. So often when we think of beliefs, we think of them as immovable and unchangeable. When someone says they have a “deeply held personal belief,” they don't mean that it's open to negotiation. They mean there's no point in discussing it because it's never going to change or evolve. And it would be easy to think of a belief in the resurrection the same way. A statement of fact. The tomb was empty. Jesus was raised two thousand years ago. End of discussion. On to the next thing.

But for Luke, a belief in the resurrection means a belief that Jesus is alive, that God is working in the world through the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. And that means that God will continue to act in ways that are unpredictable and, to use Luke's word, “astonishing.” A

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belief in the resurrection really isn't about thinking some event happened two thousand years ago. It's about trusting that something is happening right now.

So a belief in the resurrection changes our relationship with God. It opens us up to the possibility of change in the world, in our societies, in our relationships, and in ourselves. There's never a point at which we can step back from our relationship with God and say, "Well, that's done. Time to move onto the next thing."

And that openness changes our relationship with other people. We can be honest about the fact that we don't know everything. Which means that there is wisdom and edification outside the bounds of our own tradition and experience. To put it in the terms of today's story, it isn't just that Peter can enrich the life of someone like Cornelius. But that Cornelius can enrich the life of someone like Peter. We never do ministry *to* other people. We always do ministry *with* other people.

This probably sounds obvious, but if you read through the history of Christmas mission in the West, this is often not the way people who claim to believe in the resurrection have operated. The history of Christian mission in the West is deeply tied up with sins of imperialism and racism, people claiming superiority and power over others. But one of the theological mistakes lurking underneath everything else was a belief that mission only flows in one direction. From Europe across the ocean. From Peter to Cornelius. From us to them. The people who believed God had called them to bring the good news to the so-called "new world" never believed that the people they were converting had anything to teach them about the promise of God in Jesus Christ. They could never be amazed. They could never be astonished.

I was reminded of that history during synod assembly this past weekend because our synod has a partner relationship with the Lutheran church in Namibia. That relationship is based on openness and reciprocity. It isn't just us doing mission to them, but it's also about them giving their insight and wisdom and knowledge to us. We enrich one another's lives, and we encounter one another as fellow residents of the household of God.

So let's bring this back around and ask what this story tells us about beliefs and practices. One thing this story reveals is that a belief in the power of the resurrection leads us to practice a kind of reverent curiosity. Reverent because we believe the Spirit goes ahead of us, and everyone we encounter is someone God is already in relationship with. And curious because we know we're never done following God and being formed into God's people. There's always more to explore, more to be astonished by.

And sure enough, it isn't a coincidence that Luke's story ends with Peter and his group staying with Cornelius's household for a couple of days. You have to imagine they stayed not because they needed a place to crash for a few days, but because they found the new relationships too life-giving and astounding to leave so quickly. Between Peter and Cornelius, there was a desire for an exchange of experience, of knowledge, of faith, and of life. And so it is among us.

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