



## **“. . . but God Raised Him . . .”**

Preaching Text: Acts 10:34-43

31 March 2013: Easter Sunday

First United Methodist Church, Arlington, Texas

A Harvard astronomer once gave a lecture entitled, “The Expanding Universe.” He suggested there are galaxies larger than our “Milky Way” speeding outward—moving away from us faster than the speed of light. We are actually losing them. They are falling off the edge of our universe, so to speak. During the discussion time, a woman, terribly upset by this disclosure, asked the professor what we are going to do about the lost galaxies. The professor replied: “Let them go, madam, just let them go” (*Parables, Etc.*, July, 1988, Vol. 8, No. 5, p. 2).

In other words, there are just some things we cannot do anything about. We could describe our lesson today as one of those things. Even John’s Gospel reminds us with the parenthetical aside in John 4:9 that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans”—meaning Gentiles. Hear the day’s lesson for Easter Sunday from Acts 10:34-43.

34 Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 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.

39 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; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 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. 42 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. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:34-43).



Our text's setting is the house of Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment, part of the Roman military occupation force in Palestine. Cornelius, already a believer in God, has had a vision (vv. 1-8). As a result, he invited Peter to visit. It is against Jewish law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, but Peter comes anyway, with "some of the believers from Joppa" (v. 23). The passage's context is key to understanding it and its traditional title is "The Conversion of Cornelius." Yet, if we read Acts 10, we realize that Cornelius' household is not the only convert. God converts Peter too!

The church uses text for Easter for several reasons. First any likely relationship between Jews and Gentiles appears over before it begins and for historic reasons. Jews and Gentiles are sworn enemies and intend to remain so. Second it appears that for Luke, Cornelius and Peter function as models for Jewish and Gentile Christians. Their relationship narrated in Acts 10 shows the possibility that in Christ there is potentiality of resurrection for the two groups so long divided. If the chief apostle and a Roman/Gentile centurion can find life together in Christ, then the possibility exists that Christ can heal any lifeless relationship. Easter represents the new life of which Paul writes, "But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (Rom 7:6).

Luke begins the story with Cornelius relating his vision to Peter and requests that Peter say what the Lord commands to those assembled. Peter commences his sermon with the astounding assertion "that God shows no partiality." God's spirit gives Peter a loftier view of God than he had ever had. Peter then preaches about Jesus and what happened when God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit—those who believe receive forgiveness.

The day's lesson is part of Peter's sermon that, in a nutshell, sums up the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Peter links the ministry of Jesus to Israel. Peter



says: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” Thus, in Peter’s preaching, the Holy Spirit does for Cornelius’ household what Ephesians suggests: “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Eph. 2:14).

Historically, Jews and Gentiles had no dealings with one another as I mentioned a moment ago (see: John 4:9). Later, those in the Jerusalem Church demand Peter to account for his actions with Gentiles who comprised Cornelius’ household. Acts 11:2-3 tells readers: “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’”. Acts 11 later describes Peter’s experience with the previously taboo Gentiles represented by Cornelius and those of his household.

The sermon itself is nothing less than a summary of “the message” God “sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ.” Peter then preaches about the spread of the gospel “throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee.” This geographical detail dovetails with Luke’s over-arching purpose of Acts which Jesus announced to the apostles: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit [comes] . . . and . . . be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). For the Jerusalem church, Cornelius’ conversion surely seemed like “the ends of the earth.”

Peter also alludes to the presence of the Holy Spirit in Jesus as that force by which Jesus is able to do what Jesus did. It was the power of God working through Jesus. Later this appeal to the Holy Spirit also enables Peter to defend his actions concerning the Gentiles against those resisting social/religious interaction between Jews and Gentiles. Luke teaches both the early church and us that human piety will never breach the antagonism between historically opposed groups—Jews and Gentiles in this case. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the prevailing force that operates in Jesus’



ministry.

Finally, Peter's sermon wisely portrays God's hand moving behind all that happens in Jesus' life, and by extension, the church that calls upon God's name. Healing, doing good, and resurrection each deposit traces of God's spirit on each act of ministry. It is not Peter and Cornelius who decide to break down the barriers of hostility. More exactly it is the Holy Spirit, as God's agent of resolution, that achieves the reconciliation needed for true human kinship. Only God can reconcile us. **The problem with Christians is sometimes we forget this.** I close with this look at two friends.

William Sloan Coffin tells of a story that happened to him while he was still Chaplain at Yale University. He had gone through a terrible and painful divorce, and was walking this day with his friend, Jewish theologian and rabbi Abraham Heschel. They were headed for Heschel's apartment.

Heschel said, "I understand you have been through some suffering."

Coffin nodded, "Yes, it has been difficult and it still is."

Heschel said, "You should have called me."

"But you were in Los Angeles all summer."

"Well, you still should have called me."

"I didn't want to bother you."

Heschel saw right through this. It was not humility on Coffin's part, but pride. So he said again, "You should have called me. I could have helped."

Coffin became irritated with the old man and asked, "How could you have helped me?"

"I could have told you about my father, the Hasidic rabbi. He too was divorced. You see, you Christians are so vexed by your perfectionism. That is your undoing."

Coffin then wrote this in his autobiography:

He continued to talk in this vein and I felt tears starting down my cheeks. He was so right. Here he was, a Jew, reminding me, a Christian, that our salvation doesn't lay in being sinless, but in being forgiven. Without pausing he wiped my face with his handkerchief and then assured me, "God still loves you even as I do; and maybe . . . even . . . a little more."



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