

Easter Worship Series: Acts of the ‘Sent Ones’
“The Message: Gentile Inclusion”

Easter Sunday: 20 April 2014
Sermon Texts: Luke 24:1-12; Acts 10:34-43
First United Methodist Church
Arlington, Texas 76011

According to an article in *Men’s Health Magazine* twenty-five years ago the average American male is: 5’ 9” tall and weighs 173 pounds. Is married, 1.8 years older than his wife and would marry her again. Has not completed college. Earns \$28,605 per year. Prefers showering to taking a bath. Sends about 7.2 hours a week eating. Does not know his cholesterol count, but it’s 211. Watches 26 hours and 44 minutes of TV a week. Takes out the garbage in his household. Prefers white undergarments to colored. Cries about once a month—one fourth as much as Jane Doe. Falls in love an average of six times during his life. Eats his corn on the cob in circles, not straight across, and prefers his steak medium. Can’t whistle by inserting his fingers in his mouth. Will not stop to ask for directions when he’s in the car (From *Men’s Health*, quoted in *Parade Magazine*, 12-29-91, p. 5).

Perhaps the attributes I have mentioned apply to Peter—or perhaps not, but they very well could. Peter was a person who, before Jesus got hold of him was pretty much an average Joe. In this sense then, Peter’s story is not much different from any of the rest of us—that is until he met Jesus. Maybe, our life’s story is average or mediocre until we too meet the master. I like James Russell

Lowell’s poem “Mediocrity:”

Life is a leaf of paper white
Whereon each one of us may write
His word or two, and then comes night.
Greatly begin! though thou have time
But for a line, be that sublime--
Not failure, but low aim, is crime.

This poem well describes most of the life we normal, average, or mediocre people tend to live. Do what comes next, don't plan, hope for the best, but most of all do it without passion, drive, or direction. Go along to get along. Peter up to the moment that he meets Jesus was pretty much a regular guy. He worked hard, but not much distinguished him from other people. A hasty look at Luke's Gospel gives us a picture of Peter, who before he met Jesus, was like you and me but afterward . . . ?

Peter was one of Jesus' favorites:

--When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother (Luke 8:51).

--Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray (Luke 9:28).

--So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it" (Luke 22:8).

Peter was a practical man:

--Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you" (Luke 8:45).

--Peter said, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?" (Luke 12:41).

--Then Peter said, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you" (Luke 18:28).

Peter was a man who knew his limitations and had his doubts.

--When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8).

--A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "I am not!" (Luke 22:58).

--Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times" (Luke 22:60-61).

Yes, Peter was average until he met Jesus. Then, after the resurrection he became a person of faith, but many old habits and ways of thinking remained. Hear one of our two lessons for the day:

[24:1] But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. [2] They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, [3] but when they went in, they did not find the body. [4] While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. [5] The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. [6] Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, [7] that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

[8] Then they remembered his words, [9] and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. [10] Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. [11] But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. [12] But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened (Luke 24:1-12).

Before the resurrection, Peter had many doubts and disappointments in his discipleship with Jesus. Yet, at moments he seemed to display some of the fine characteristics we would expect of Jesus' disciples. After the resurrection, however, Peter was a cut above. In his new found faith in the greater purposes of God brought in Christ Jesus, Peter revealed leadership qualities endeared him to numerous Christians through the centuries and around the world.

Our lesson today comes from Peter's sermon at the house of Cornelius. The Acts text is part of Peter's sermon to a group of converts, but not just any

group of converts. This group of converts was gentile. Peter was preaching to and eating with people that his tradition would never have worshipped with nor eaten with—ever! Some people call this text the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman centurion. But I think if you carefully were to read the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, you might conclude it was Peter and not Cornelius that was converted. This is why Peter would proclaim boldly: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34).

In fact, Peter will spend a lot of time later answering the traditional Jewish- Christians in Jerusalem why exactly it was that he took this bold step to have table fellowship with gentiles. It was like Richard Nixon opening diplomatic relations with Red China, or Anwar Sadat beginning a peace process with Israel. No one could be more surprised than Nixon or Sadat about the outcome of their diplomatic work.

One of the blessings of Easter is that God accepts all persons who want to be in relationship with God and lead holy and upright lives as disciples of Jesus. Because there is an upside to the Easter, there is also a great deal of irony to Easter—things in God’s world are never as they seem. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, we enjoy the gifts of grace that give us many good things: salvation, hope, peace, pardon, redemption, acquittal, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

[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).

On a Sunday morning in 1865, a black man entered a stylish church in Richmond, Va. When the church served communion he walked down the aisle and knelt at the altar. A rustle of resentment swept the congregation. How dare he?! After all, believers in that church used the common cup. Abruptly a notable layperson stood up, stepped forward, and knelt beside the black man. With Robert E. Lee setting the example, the congregation soon followed his lead

(Moody Bible Institute’s *Today in the Word*, September, 1991, p. 15).

Peter changed, a Virginia church changed—even the South changed, and we too can change—all thanks to God’s power loosed on the world via Jesus’ resurrection.

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