

“Is It Soup Yet?”

Easter Sunday 2005

Text: Acts 10

Alleluia, Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Now that is a bold claim! It rolls off our tongues on Easter morning but that doesn't lessen how radical those words truly are. In a world bent on destruction, we gather here to be reminded that good *will* triumph over evil because hope *is* stronger than fear and because life *is* stronger than death. The empty tomb marks a radically new beginning—the beginning of the journey from death into life. Wherever you may be on that journey, I invite you in the name of Christ to keep moving and to take the next steps by putting your trust in the God who is making all things new.

Liturgically speaking, that is a (gentle) reminder that Easter lasts fifty days, not just this one! I yearn for this congregation to be as full for the next seven weeks as we move toward Pentecost as it is today: so that we can listen together to the unfolding story of the work God is doing in the world, work that God desires for us to share in.

This morning I want to tell you about a congregation—in another time and place—but not nearly so different from us as we may initially think. I want to tell you about a community that wasn't afraid to live as Easter people: pushing the edges, shattering old boundaries, inspiring hope even in the midst of a declining Roman empire. I want to remind you about First Church, Jerusalem—from which the good news spread to the north, south, east, and west. And as it did, lives were changed. And as it did, the community itself was transformed. With a risen Lord, stasis is not an option.

When we last saw Peter he was a broken man. He had betrayed the rabbi who had called him to fish for people. In the end, when the chips were down, he didn't say “you are the Christ” when he was picked out of a crowd for his Galilean accent. Instead he said “I do not know the man.” Now that might have been the end of the story.

But Peter is a changed man when we see him preaching in Acts today. Something has happened to him. He's a man on the move—boldly proclaiming to anyone who will listen what he once claimed in secret at Caesarea Philippi: that yes, this Jesus really is the Messiah.

So in the tenth chapter of Acts, we are ironically once again in Caesarea—the very place where Peter first became clear that Jesus was more than a rabbi, more than a faithful friend. The narrator calls our attention to a Roman army officer named Cornelius: a God-fearing and generous man of prayer. Well that all sounds nice. But he's still a Roman soldier, the imperialist pig! He's still a Gentile. He's still not us—as far as any first-century Jew is concerned. He may be a decent guy and all but he's a Roman soldier and he is still part of a foreign occupying power.

Anyway, Cornelius has this vision—around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The vision is pretty clear: he sees an angel and the angel says, “Cornelius: send men to Joppa and find a man named Peter.”

Now Joppa is about thirty miles away, so this isn't just around the block mind you. But he sends some men.

Around noon the next day, Peter has his own dream. He is up on his roof praying and he has the strangest vision. He sees the heavens opening and something like a large bedsheet being lowered: on it are all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds. And a voice says: "Peter, kill...eat."

And Peter says, "no way Lord. I've kept kosher my whole life. I've never eaten anything unclean. (Well, I did think once about trying a shrimp, but I didn't do it, Lord!)" But the vision happens three times, and three times Peter hears a voice that says: "what God has made clean you must not call profane."

Now this makes no sense to Peter. It goes against all he has been taught. Peter isn't a Christian—we need to remember that; the term doesn't even yet exist. Peter is a Jew—who happens to believe Messiah has come and his name is Jesus. Peter has been a faithful Jew his whole life and he expected, I'm sure, to die that way. And to be a Jew is to keep Torah—all of it, not just the convenient parts. It's to be set apart—called to be God's holy people. It's to keep the Sabbath holy and to be circumcised, and to avoid certain foods. It's just what his mother taught him to do.

Well you can see where this thing is going...the men arrive from Caesarea, and they find this rather confused apostle. He is now asked to make the return trip and to travel thirty miles back to the place where he first said to his friend, Jesus, "you are the Christ." And the "rest of the story," as Paul Harvey might say, is history. These two guys get together, exchange visions, and figure out that God is doing something new here. Cornelius says: let's have lunch together. I've got this great chef from Louisiana who makes a mean crawfish and sausage gumbo...

Because that's what it comes down to—really and truly—always when it is Easter. With whom are we willing to sit and eat? At our own tables, at our church potluck suppers, at the Eucharistic feast: who is included? Is it soup yet, and is there room enough at the table for one more?

Jewish dietary laws don't tend to get Christians all worked up. So imagine, if it's easier for you, that Peter is Irish Catholic and Cornelius is Protestant and they both live in Belfast—and instead of having soup together they decide it's time to sit down and have a Guinness—and in so doing they find out they have a whole lot more in common than what divides them.

Or imagine Peter is a Palestinian Muslim and Cornelius is a Russian Jew living on West Bank...and instead of soup they decide it is finally time to sit down and share some hummus and olives and feta together.

The point is that Peter and Cornelius break bread together. They become *companions* for that is what that word means in Latin—literally "to bread with." They get a sense in their bones (that they believe is from God) that it's time to eat together, time to make peace, time to find reconciliation. That's what this bizarre dream about clams and shrimp and pork chops coming down on a sheet from heaven is really about: about breaking down old barriers, about the risk of reconciliation. And I propose to you this morning that this is the true meaning of Easter.

So Peter gives us our Easter sermon today, not me: my task is simply to invite us to listen to it with new ears and to try to begin to live it a little bit in our own time and place. “I truly understand that God shows no partiality,” Peter says, “but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” He preaches the gospel not only with his lips but with his life, as he sits and eats lunch with this Roman army officer.

And then the Holy Spirit falls on all of them, and they are all astounded, and then Peter says, “‘how can we not baptize this guy?’ I mean I know it sounds crazy—and I know it goes against everything I’ve ever been taught. But let me tell you I’ve seen a guy raised from the dead so from there pretty much anything is up for grabs!”

Things are out of control! The Spirit is loose! And the Spirit messes up our tidy little worlds. And, oddly, I find that incredibly comforting. I find it comforting because it reminds me and maybe it reminds you that Easter isn’t about tranquility. I’m not sure that I’ve yet experienced a Christmas where “all is calm and all is bright.” But I *know* I haven’t had an Easter like that! Because Easter is about transformation and new life; it’s about things that we thought impossible becoming possible. Worlds get turned upside down! And that’s always messy!

For the Church that means, both in the first-century and into the twenty-first, that we are a work-in-progress. We don’t have it all figured out yet, and we don’t have to. It reminds us we aren’t in control. We just have to understand that God is in charge—not us. And that Christ is alive and the Spirit is at work. We are simply invited along for the ride—a ride far more scary than anything you can find at Disneyworld or Six Flags. Christ invites us to pay attention and if we dare to join in the work that God is still doing in the world. That work is still about the power of hope over fear, of life over death, of breaking down walls so that strangers can become friends.

So wherever you see things like this happening, there is nothing really to do except to break into song:

Alleluia, Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

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