

“Catching Up to Resurrection”

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A Reflection for Easter Sunday

Acts 10.34-43

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This reflection is, in a sense, a rather long introduction to the Bible reading. So I suggest you read the reflection first.

He stood at the doorstep to the home. Peter was not comfortable. (Maybe you know the feeling. You're welcomed in, but are not sure you should go.)

Yes, Peter had heard all the good things about Cornelius. This Roman was prayerful and devout, a man of character. He loved God. If Cornelius had been a Jew, you would say he was a mensch, a really good guy!¹

But that's the point. Cornelius was not a Jew.

Peter was not bigoted, more than anyone else. He just knows that God worked through Israel. Jews were God's special people, chosen to shine God's light, to live God's ways, to be faithful to God in an unfaithful world. It's not that they were better than anyone else. It's just the way God chose to work.

And to keep faithful, to keep shining, to keep God's way, they had to stay separate, and maintain their distinctiveness. Whenever they had not, things went very wrong.

Peter had met Gentiles, non-Jews, and had dealings with them. But now, he was at one of their homes. Cornelius . . . the last time he had been this close to a centurion, an imperial army officer, was in the garden . . . when they took Jesus.

Peter was not comfortable. When you follow Jesus, he messes with your comfort.

II

Like that morning when Peter had raced to the graveyard. No, he did not believe Mary. Would you? But then he saw the tomb was empty! Then, Jesus himself, as alive as you and me. No! More alive than we have ever been.

Though, one day, we will be so alive too. When God's Kingdom comes, and God makes things right, and God drives away all that destroys, and God restores creation, and God vindicates God's holy ones. Why resurrection? Because God is the Creator, who won't give up on His good creation. God will resurrect it. Why resurrection? Because God is just, and those who have died—especially for justice and righteousness, for their faithfulness to God—they won't be left out of the good news. God will resurrect them!

¹ Peter could not have described Cornelius, or anyone, as a mensch. The word is Yiddish and comes from German roots, which developed many centuries after.

Peter had always assumed resurrection, someday. God will raise everyone and judge the world, someday. God will set everything right, someday.

What Peter nor anyone had expected was that, before then, God would do it first with Jesus. God raised Jesus out of the dead, like the first shoot pushing out of the cold soil. Resurrecting Jesus first, God showed us where things are heading for all of us, what we can count on, a preview of the best yet to come.

Ever since, Peter has been trying to catch up with Jesus' resurrection.²

III

Like that morning of the crucifixion, when Peter had wept. How could Jesus die? It's not what successful kings do! God's anointed Messiah was sent to free God's people, to bring back all who were lost, to forgive us who push God away, to vindicate God, and all who belong to him. That's the Messiah!

How could execution on a cross have anything to do with that?

A cross is not just about death. It's about humiliation, defeat, shame, condemnation. A cross is a curse. That's why Jesus' enemies used it. They wanted to crush him, and any ideas that he was anything more than nothing.

Resurrection decisively overturned that verdict. God raised Jesus! So Jesus was not cursed. God raised Jesus! So Jesus was not condemned. God raised Jesus! So Jesus was not rejected. His humiliation is now glory. His defeat is now victory. Those nail wounds, which the risen Jesus still bore, were, in fact, marks of God's approval.

Everything Peter thought he knew about God was being challenged, because of Jesus the Messiah, crucified and resurrected. Peter was still catching up with Jesus' resurrection.

IV

By resurrecting Jesus, God showed him to be the Judge.

Believe it or not, judgement is good news! Where justice is corrupt, where wicked thrive while innocents wither, where wealth and might hold the world hostage, where beauty is twisted and life stolen, we need judgement. Flourishing can only happen when the truth is finally told, when the verdict is finally passed, when sin is finally shown for the death it truly is.³ The disease can be cured only after its symptoms are properly diagnosed.⁴ That's

² I found this image of "catching up" from this comment by Eric Barreto: "*Peter and the church are only playing catch-up at this point in the narrative of Acts.*" It is in his article "Commentary on Acts 10:34-43," Working Preacher. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1261. Accessed March 29, 2015.

³ Jennifer McBride writes, ". . . *the fallen world needs judgement proclaimed upon all that distorts the beauty and fullness of life. Indeed, humanity's redemptive flourishing depends on the affirmation of this divine*

judgement.

The great news is that God has appointed Jesus your judge. Whom would you rather have? If you believe in and trust him, you know the answer. Look, he went around healing people. He is in the business of making us whole: our broken bodies, our confused minds, our sin-stained souls. Jesus judges your wrongs, to make you right.

Jesus your Judge forgives. Forgiveness is not saying, *“Whatever you did, don’t worry about it. No big deal. I understand.”* That’s not forgiveness. It’s excusing and covering up. After the truth is uncovered about the things for which we have no excuse, forgiveness then says, *“Be free.”*⁶ Not, *“That was okay.”* Forgiveness says, *“I am making you okay.”* Jesus our judge, forgives.

V

So here’s Peter, by now sitting in Cornelius’ living room. This Roman centurion has gathered a crowd to hear this Jewish fisherman. A good host, he’s offered some tea and cookies. Peter has not touched them. He is unsure. They are not kosher.

Then, it clicks for him. God raised Jesus, who had been crucified, and let Peter and others see, so they could announce this great news . . . for everyone.

The crucified and resurrected Messiah, is for the Lord for all. Not just for Peter and his people. The work God is doing in Israel is now a grace-explosion outward. Even into Cornelius’ house. Your house too.

Peter has been racing to catch up to Jesus’ resurrection. *“Because God raised Jesus, then his life must mean something more than I thought. His execution on a cross must be the opposite of what I had feared. He is the Lord of all creation. He is the liberating Messiah for all enslaved. He is everyone’s Judge, because we all need truth. He is God’s forgiveness, because we all need to be well.”*

VI

If we are following Jesus together, as the church-community he calls out from every nation for the blessing of his whole world, we will always be catching up to Jesus’ resurrection.

Where do we need to be catching up with Jesus, now?

We’ll always have more to discover, more to realize. What does his death mean? What

judgement.” The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 106.

⁴ “To heal, the gospel must overcome what is killing people in order to restore them to life.” Craig Koester, “Commentary on Acts 10:34-43,” Working Preacher. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4. Accessed March 29, 2015.

⁵ The word Peter uses in verse 43 is *aphesis*, which means “release.”

does his resurrection mean? Who is he? Jesus will always be showing us more. He will be inviting us, pushing us, poking us. He will be surprising us and making us uncomfortable. He will be delighting us with astonishment.⁶

Where do we need to be catching up with Jesus, now? Each of us? Us together? Where is Jesus going? What boundaries is he breaking? Where is his good news poised to make a difference?

I can offer you evidence that convinces me Jesus resurrected from the dead. We can sing about it, like today. You can hear a thousand sermons about it (sounds like fun!). Yet the most convincing argument for resurrection is communities of the most unlikely people, making the most remarkable difference, as they catch up to where Jesus is already going.

Now, as he sips his tea and munches a biscuit, Peter sees he still has catching up to do. Jesus is already ahead of him.

So he turns to Cornelius and the others, and starts telling them about Jesus.

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts from every nation those who fear him and do what is right.

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace by means of Jesus Christ, who is Lord over all.

You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and let him be seen.

He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he had been raised from the dead. He commanded us to announce to the people and to bear witness that he is the one marked out by God as judge of the living and the dead.

All the prophets bear witness about him that through his name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins.

⁶ William Willimon, Acts (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 98.