

Resurrected by Forgiveness
Scripture Lessons: John 20:1-11, Acts 10:34-43

Before we read the scripture, we need to set some context. On Easter, we sometimes are not listening that closely, because we have heard the story over and over. Let's put ourselves back into the story, to see if we hear news that is new, ...and maybe even some good news.

He was trusted with leadership, and he had potential, but he was slow to catch on. His impulsiveness got in the way of his initiative. In other words, Peter would jump over a cliff for Jesus before he looked to see how far he would fall. He protested that his loyalty was unflinching in an upper room when Jesus spoke of betrayal. He drew a sword to defend his master in the garden with the arresting soldiers. Then when his curiosity kept him close to the palace by the fire through the night, he was recognized. And what did he do? ...exactly what he promised Jesus he would never do!

He was missing all day Friday. We know that through Sunday he was hidden back in that same little room, more afraid than he had been around the fire, ...until the women came and told him the tomb was empty. They had seen the Lord, the *risen* Lord. Peter went running to see for himself. He was too late, and the angel/messenger just told him Jesus was not there, ...he had risen. Risen? Really? Then that night Jesus walked into the room through a close door, and told the followers just to trust him.

So, seven of them went back to fishing. What else was there to do? Sitting around that fire by the lakeside in the daybreak, Jesus looks Peter straight in the eye and asks him "Simon, [back to the old ways, back to the old name] do you love me more than these fish?" "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." "Then feed my sheep, ...my little lambs." I made you like me — you are a shepherd, not a fisherman. Lead my flock. Bring my lost ones into the flock. Love others, the way I have loved you. To me, you are always Peter. Be who I have made you to be.

Now we are ready to listen for the word of the Spirit in the lesson assigned for Resurrection Sunday. Let's see if Peter finally got it. It is after waiting days for the Spirit with the others in that same room, and waiting has tempered his impulsiveness. The Spirit came, not just in the room, but in fire and power to everyone who would listen. Now, it is after Pentecost power, and Peter's trust has overcome his fear.

Acts 10:34-43: Peter began to speak: "I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Those who fear him and do what is right are acceptable to him, no matter what race they belong to. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, proclaiming the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

You know of the great event that took place throughout the land of Israel, beginning in Galilee after John preached his message of baptism. You know about Jesus of Nazareth and how God poured out on him the Holy Spirit and power. He went everywhere, doing good and healing all who were under the power of the Devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses of everything that he did in the land of Israel and in Jerusalem. Then they put him to death by nailing him to a cross. But God raised him from death three days later and

caused him to appear, not to everyone, but only to the witnesses that God had already chosen, that is, to us who ate and drank with him after he rose from death.

And he commanded us to preach the gospel to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God has appointed judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets spoke about him, saying that all who believe in him will have their sins forgiven through the power of his name."

Has Peter finally "gotten it"? Well, he is not trying to jump ahead of Jesus and tell him where things are headed. He is not trying to keep his options open, and be realistic to protect himself. He does not have a trace of hedging or hesitation. He just tells what has happened to Jesus, and what has happened to him. And he tells who Jesus is, and what it means to him.

Let's stop for just a moment to clear our heads from the real distraction we bring to "Easter." I don't mean the whole bunny and egg stuff that has absolutely nothing to do with a Christian holy day. I don't mean the dress-up clothes or the Sunday dinner with the family. I am talking about our problem with a dead body in a tomb disappearing, and people saying that God brought it back to life! How can intelligent, educated, sophisticated people in a scientific world say a resurrection is possible?

Why is the resurrection such a barrier to trusting for so many people? It's not like we live in a world where we can explain everything. In the 21st century, we are just beginning to realize how little we know about how the world — about reality itself. Why do we obsess trying to disprove mysteries that the people closer to the event took as matter-of-fact? His own followers were the last people looking for him to come back. They didn't even recognize him when he showed up. Some of them needed extra convincing. When they tell what happened, they are brutally honest about their own doubt.

Why? Maybe they realized he had not "come back" at all; ...that who he was after the tomb was emptied was dramatically different from who he had been before. He was not back in his body, but he was in a new, different "body" — more of a spirit "embodiment" that was in the same form and voice, but not limited like a physical body. They were in the middle of a complete mystery, but they could not deny what they had experienced. What about us moderns? We experience mysteries we can't explain all the time in everyday in ordinary life, when we come up against something we have never seen before. And a lot of the time, our explanations do not explain anything at all.

Peter's "I don't know how" can't keep him from saying "Here is what I saw." He stands up in front of a bunch of strangers and says, "Here is my story, and I'm sticking to it." We do it everyday. How much does our not being able to believe "Jesus came back to life" keep us from seeing our own lives in new light? Just for a little while this morning, let's just trust Peter and a bunch of people who had first-hand experience more than we trust the hearsay of centuries, and see where it might take us.

Peter is a lot of folk's favorite follower. We all gladly admit that we are a lot like Peter. Maybe the lesson he learned in eating and drinking with the risen Lord is the one we need more than any other. Maybe the turn-around he experienced could happen to us. The real lesson? Did you miss it when we read Peter's story, his witness? Just in case you need me to put it in italics and bold for you: ***"... all who believe in him will have their sins forgiven."***

Peter says Jesus is a judge of the living and the dead. And in a mystery as unbelievable as a resurrection, this judge is a *forgiver*! Peter says he saw this man work miracles, heal people, touch lepers, treat women like human beings, treat tax collectors like friends, stay true to God when he was in the middle of “cruel and unusual punishment” before they finally murdered him out of his misery. This man who even put the destiny of his mission in the hands of a bunch of common fisherman, ...did it all to tell us that the God he loved and loved him is a Forgiver! Jesus did not *just* die; he died for *our sins*! He was not just speaking to Peter from that cross when he said, “Father, forgive them. They don’t have a clue what they are doing.” Jesus loves the whole world; the Lord of heaven and earth forgives us all!

Sanctuaries are as safe as upper rooms. Why not admit something to yourself? The mystery you really have a hard time believing is that God has forgiven *you*! If you can just accept the complete mystery that God Almighty, the Righteous Judge “did not come into the world to condemn it, but to save it,” then forgiveness will completely change your ideas about God, about the world, about yourself. If you can just imagine God as nothing but love big enough to forgive, then you can give up your “closet skepticism” or your professed agnosticism, or all the other feeble ways we try to explain away a mystery that is too good to be true. If you can ignore the temptation to try to explain forgiveness, try to put it into some idea that makes it less than the mystery and the miracle it is, then you can experience the power of a love that finally turned Simon into Peter.

Knowing you are forgiven sets you free to live beyond the mess you have made. Living that freedom gives you power to become the person you know in your longings and have always thought was just an illusion. What was Jesus telling Simon that morning? “I know you. You made you Peter. Be who I made you to be.” What happened to Peter will happen to all of us who just suspend the hesitation and hedging, and simply trust. We come to believe that “God raised this Jesus from the dead” without worrying about how, because God the Forgiver has raised us from the dead-end life we have made of ourselves and given us the real life we have known we had in us all along.

Try to imagine what that kind of love could do with you! Simply accept the Spirit-fact that God loves you and has already forgiven every evil you have done and every good you have left undone. Christ’s forgiveness will change you as radically as turning around and walking in a different, opposite direction, ...will change you as completely as walking around in the same world but seeing more than on its surface of happenings and stuff. Living in such mystery, you may know meaning is so deep and real that life cannot be reduced to a beginning and end. Forgiveness will change you as wonder-fully as a new creation where the old has died and everything has become new.

Who in this new creating will we become? Who did Peter become? Another Jesus? ...hardly. But he and we are on our way. Being a follower is all Jesus has ever asked, and that is all that is required. We are who we are in God’s mercy, and we have been given the same work Christ gave Peter that morning: to love others the way Christ loves us, to forgive others as we have been forgiven, to show mercy to a world that will be as shocked to see forgiveness as they would be if they saw someone risen from death to a different life everlasting.

This room is full of resurrection, full of people risen to follow his life this morning. Let’s become who Christ made us to be. Let’s live in the wonder and mystery of the new creating in the risen Lord’s grace and power. Let’s go hunting for the Simons of the world, and see if they recognize the Forgiver in us.