

Easter Sunday: Day of Resurrection  
April 21, 2019  
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Acts 10:34-43  
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24  
1 Corinthians 15:19-26  
Luke 24:1-2

*Then Peter began to speak to them:  
"I truly understand that God shows no partiality ..."*

And I want to ask him, "Peter, what took you so long?!"

We hear this reading every year, which is kind of odd. We hear different epistles in other years, from Colossians or other verses from 1 Corinthians. We heard Luke's account of Easter this morning, but other years we might hear Matthew or Mark or John. But it's always Peter's sermon for our first reading. So we might assume it's his Easter sermon.

And maybe it is an Easter sermon, but it's not from that first Easter. No, it was weeks later. At least. Probably months. Maybe years. Luke tells us Peter and the disciples waited in Jerusalem for 50 days, waited for the Holy Spirit to descend upon them at Pentecost. And only then, the life of the early Church kicked into high gear:

and then there were persecutions and martyrdoms;  
followed by conflicts and conversions;  
all making way for growth – in numbers and in understanding all along the way.

And somewhere in the midst of all this, Peter preached these words we hear every Easter:

**Then** Peter began to speak to them:  
*"I truly understand that God shows no partiality ..."*

Of course, nobody understood Easter itself right from the start, and certainly no one comprehended the implications of it all in a moment. That's a point we do well to remember.

In all the stories of encounters with the risen Jesus, nobody ever says, "I knew you'd show up? What took you so long?" And nobody asks Jesus, "Have you had breakfast yet?"

No, they're all surprised. All caught off guard.

The women who went to the tomb that morning were looking for a dead body, of course, not a risen Savior. So when they find the stone removed and the tomb empty, they're perplexed (not inspired). And when two figures in dazzling attire ask them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they don't really have an answer.

It's a poignant question. A profound question. A penetrating question. Even now.

I've preached on the theme before on Easter, and I'll probably do so again. But this morning, it occurs to me that it's also actually kind of a stupid question. The women set out to look for the living among the dead; they were looking for a corpse in a cemetery.

And, of course, when the women return to tell the men who slept in and stayed behind ... well, the men have no idea what to make of it at all. They're dismissive, if not downright derisive:

*These words seemed to them an idle tale ...*

Which makes Peter's response actually kind of remarkable. Peter gets up and runs to the tomb. And after he stoops down and looks in, we're told that he goes back home ... and is "amazed."

Now being amazed is still a long way from being convinced, but it's a start.

And the way I imagine it, Peter must have started thinking more about who Jesus was all along. Peter had long ago decided that Jesus was wise and wonderful, gracious and saintly. It was Peter, after all, who answered Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" with the answer, "You are the Messiah, the Son of God." But what if Jesus is even more than that?

I think maybe Peter's amazement on that first Easter was the start of a subtle, but profound shift. Peter always knew that Jesus was like God. But what if God is like Jesus?

The preacher and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber sketches it all out this way:

Once upon a time, the God of the universe was basically fed up with being on the receiving end of all our human projections, tired of being nothing more to us than what *we* thought God should be: angry, show-offy, defensive, insecure -- in short, the vengeance-seeking tyrant we would be if we were God. So, at that time, over 2,000 years ago, God's loving desire to really be known overflowed the heavens and was made manifest in the rapidly dividing cells within the womb of an insignificant peasant girl named Mary. And when the time came for her to give birth to God, there was no room in our expectations -- no room in any impressive or spiffy or safe place. So this God was born in straw and dirt. He grew up, this Jesus of Nazareth, left his home, and found some, let's be honest, rather unimpressive characters to follow him ... read it for yourselves. These people were questionable. So, with his little band of misfits, Jesus went about the countryside turning water to wine, eating with all the wrong people, angering the religious establishment, and insisting that in him the kingdom of God had come near -- that through him ... God was coming right to us. He touched the unclean, and used spit and dirt to heal the blind, and said crazy, destabilizing things, such as "the first shall be last and the last shall be first," and "sell all you have and give it to the poor."

... that changes everything. If what we see in Jesus is God's own self, revealed, then what we are dealing with here is a God who is ridiculously indiscriminate about choosing friends.<sup>i</sup>

It's a high Christology: to be befriended by Jesus is surprising; to be befriended by God is much more again. And to connect the dots to discover that God is like Jesus, "is ridiculously indiscriminate about choosing friends" is ... well, that's AMAZING!

Peter had been raised to believe that God was actually pretty discriminating. And that's why it's important that those whom God has chosen live up to their special status. So they obey the commandments. They follow the rules. They eat the right foods.

And then, one day – and this is the backstory to Peter's Easter sermon ... one day, as Peter was praying, he had a vision. It was the middle of the day and he was hungry. And I suppose that's why Peter saw, in his vision, something like a sheet lowered down before him full of all kinds of creatures he'd always been told NOT to eat.

A voice told him to get up and eat what was being laid out before him. But though he was hungry, Peter flat out refused:

*By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.*

But the voice rebuked him in no uncertain terms, saying:

*What God has made clean, you shall not call profane.*

And this all happened not once, not twice, but three times. And you have to know that Peter must found it all confounding and perplexing. It ran against everything he'd been taught as he was growing up. And as he tried to make sense of it all, messengers from Caesarea arrived. They came at the behest of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who had also had a vision the day before. In his vision, he'd been told to ask Peter to come to his house.

So Peter went.

Cornelius was waiting to receive him, along with his relatives and some friends he had invited to hear what Peter had to tell them. They all fell at Peter's feet, fawning over him, worshipping him. But Peter told them to get up. He was no better than them.

And I wonder if that's the moment he put "two and two" together, if this is the long and winding road it took for Peter to be able to preach his Easter sermon. I wonder if the earlier and amazing insight that God, like Jesus, truly is "ridiculously indiscriminate" about choosing friends" had taken root in Peter. And I wonder if this vision of a world in which God makes clean the things Peter rejected as "unclean" or "profane" was the water that gave growth to a conviction that he could no longer consider any person profane or unclean either.

And maybe before he really even knew what he was going to say, he opened his mouth:

**Then Peter began to speak to them:**

*"I truly [am beginning to] understand that God shows no partiality ..."*

And suddenly, almost before his sermon was over, Peter was baptizing Cornelius and the whole congregation of God's new friends. Peter had been raised not to befriend people like that. Now he was making them family.

That's what makes this such a great Easter sermon, this proclamation that God is still making people like Peter new again. And making friends of us all.

I'm tempted to lament how long it took Peter to get there. But that's not the point; the point, of course, is that he did get there in the end.

And it's nothing short of miraculous. And it's all because of Easter.

And there's enough there at the very start for us to still celebrate here this Easter. For in the risen Christ, we confess that God has made friends of us all. There is neither Republican nor Democrat; neither citizen nor undocumented visitor; neither gay nor straight. We are all one.

It may seem that it sure is taking us a very long time to realize it. And maybe it is.

But nobody gets any of this all at once.

We're all on a journey of discovery, trying to unpack what it all means to proclaim that God shows no partiality. Easter proclaims that God is at work in us and in our world in ways we have not yet imagined. And this isn't the end of the story; it's just the beginning of a long and winding road that leads, if we dare follow, to the all-encompassing loving arms of God's indiscriminate love.

And that is why we make our proclamation:

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

*The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.*

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<sup>1</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber @ <https://sojo.net/articles/reflection-easter-beyond-chocolate-and-new-bedding-true-gospel>.