

Resurrection Life Emerging (Acts 10:44-48)

Every now and again, Teresa and I enjoy watching one of the home makeover shows. We don't have a favorite we watch—we drop in on what's available at the moment on that channel. Apart from the personalities, they all seem to follow the same pattern. People decide that their home needs updating, or folks on the hunt for a bargain look for a fixer-upper get hold of someone whose vision for change will create something new and fresh. During the planning phase, the remodeler will ask the homeowner what they hope for, and often answers include things like, “we want more room to entertain friends,” or “we need more space to accommodate our growing family.” With that bit of information, the host starts planning what has to change, and typically this involves tearing down interior walls, or adding outside space, sometimes entire rooms are displaced—the kitchen moves from its original location, or a spare room turns into a huge closet. In some cases, once the homeowner has given permission to proceed, that's the last time they see the interior until it's done. When the big reveal happens, the happy ending follows as folks ooh and awe over their new space. The closing shot shows all their friends over now sharing space together.

And that's great when you're expecting it. But how would the outcome differ if all this happened to your house while you were away on vacation? In other words, you hadn't ordered the change—you simply left for vacation and when you returned, everything shifted. Would the ending be as happy? Eventually, perhaps—especially as you begin to enjoy the advantages of the makeover, but at first glance, it would likely be a jolt to your system.

If you can imagine this, you might begin to appreciate the situation in which Peter found himself as related by our passage today. The selected passage for the day gives us only the outcome of a much larger event—one that begins at the beginning of this chapter where the principal characters—Cornelius, a devout Roman centurion who prays and supports the poor, and Peter, the leader of the apostles—receive a vision. The visions are different and given to them individually, but the result of their obedience to the visions draws them together for what turns out to be a paradigm shift in the purpose of Christ's kingdom. While the context of this event serves a larger purpose in the author's record—the expansion of the gospel and kingdom to the Gentiles as a whole, the focus of our short passage draws attention to what's taking place in Peter providing insight for our present journey with Christ.

To briefly set the stage, Peter and Cornelius, as we noted a moment ago, were vastly different from one another. Peter as leader of the apostles, was steeped in his Jewish faith though, as the preceding chapters indicate, he was being weaned from its cultural captivity and institutional inertia into the freedom of the gospel Christ had taught. This was a progressive process in him; some forms of his faith history were more easily sloughed off than others. And despite his growing courage, culturally he was a common Jewish laborer living in occupied territory under the authority of Rome, and as the recognized leader of those following Christ—executed by Rome as an insurrectionist—Peter lived in the shadow of peril according to the whims of Roman officials. By contrast, Cornelius was a Gentile, not merely a Gentile, but a Roman, not merely a Roman, but a centurion, an official charged with enforcing Roman rule, the type of official whose duties could include supervising executions such as the one suffered by Jesus. However, Cornelius had the reputation of what the Jews called “a God-fearer,” meaning that he lived by the values of Jewish faith without converting to Judaism. He was said to have been respected by all the Jewish people, which said quite a bit in that day.

The vision Cornelius experienced simply directed him to send for Peter. The Spirit was leading Cornelius through next steps towards the faith he was ready to receive. In Peter's case the vision was a bit more complex. In his vision, a voice instructed Peter to eat non-kosher animals—a clear departure from the norms of faith by which he lived, and when Peter resisted, the voice which he understood to be the Lord said, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This exchange happened three times—things seem to happen in threes for Peter—and it was followed up by the Spirit directing him to accompany those seeking him, for they were sent by the Spirit. The culmination of these visions and the obedience by those who received them resulted in an otherwise improbable encounter between two diverse people

representing a cultural divide that would be bridged by the gospel under the direction of the Spirit. Now again, the limitation of our passage suggests that the focus of our attention should be on how this impacted Peter, who I would further suggest, seems to have been surprised at the outcome. But there are some lessons we learn from this, beginning with this:

Peter was learning to trust the leading of the Holy Spirit. This was new territory for him. Prior to the resurrection of Jesus, Peter's faith history held that the Holy Spirit only inhabited Israel's kings and prophets, but Jesus had promised the indwelling of the Spirit to them, not as kings or prophets, but simply as his followers. Since the resurrection, Peter was learning to equate the impulse of the Spirit as the presence of Christ providing direction. In the newness of that reality, Peter discovered the Spirit leading him into new territory for the kingdom. By trusting the Spirit, Peter found himself capable of carrying on the ministry of Jesus, and as a result of this event he discovered an expanded audience for the message of Jesus. To that time his witness of Jesus was largely confined to those most like himself—Jews, with whom he had much in common, but now, by the Spirit's prompting he was pressed beyond his comfort zone to reach out to others unlike himself who were ready to hear what Jesus offered. I wonder if the Spirit is doing the same with us. We tend to hang around with folks most like us—we're comfortable with them having much in common. We might share with them insight we gain from faith or hint at it. But given the climate of our time, might the Spirit be prompting us beyond our comfort zone, into new territory with folks unlike ourselves, who having been broken by life in general are ready to hear something fresh that transcends barriers of culture, background, misfortune, political ideology, and social distinctions? What improbable encounters might we experience in the power of the resurrection through obedience to the Spirit's prompting? Are we learning to trust the Spirit?

Secondly, Peter's message when he arrived at the household of Cornelius, was simple testimony about the reality of Jesus' resurrection and its impact for life. There was no deep theology there—Peter simply told the truth, how it had touched him, and what he understood the wider implication to be. By the same token, we are capable of this. The basic content of our witness for Christ is simply the truth about how following Jesus has made and is making a difference in our own life. Complicated questions about deep theology can be directed to Pastor Andrea, but for the most part—the part that really matters, is simply relaying what you've come to know about Jesus and why following his teaching delivers the most sensible approach to life. How you can handle conflict in productive rather than destructive ways, how you have peace amid challenging times, why you have confidence for the future, why joy pervades your demeanor, and the basis for your hope is what people will want to know—especially people whose lives are broken. We needn't have complex presentations of the gospel prepared, we need only tell the truth evidenced by the life we lead.

Third lesson—the Spirit will affirm the reception of the message with visible results. In Peter's situation this was dramatic and startling—there are reasons why this moment unfolded the way it did with Cornelius that we don't have sufficient time to explore right now, but though that moment surprised Peter, he knew what it meant. They were ready to receive what the Spirit was bringing, and the presence of the Spirit was evident. It will likely not happen like this in the situations we're led to, and the evidence of the Spirit's work may not be as immediate as this, but when ready people respond to the message prompted by the Spirit, the Spirit will take hold just as surely. Lives will change, hope and joy will emerge. We don't always know what kind of preparation has readied people for the message. Cornelius was yearning for more of God—he and his household were ready for next steps, they were open to what the Spirit was offering. It may well be that we'll be led to folks like them. But people who have been disappointed by life, or broken by its weight, or dissembled by sin, or wearied by despair can be just as ready for next steps. They can and often are yearning for more, they are ready for a gospel as good as this, and the Spirit is yearning for them.

The last lesson for today comes by way of Peter's response—his gracious welcome in the face of the Spirit's work. Doubtless he was still sorting through the event as it unfolded, yet he recognized the Spirit working and understood that something different, something new was emerging and he rolled with the wave of the Spirit. It may be that we're in that same place

today. Like Peter, we may not fully grasp all the implications of it, but trusting the Spirit we sense change on the horizon. The church as it has been may not be the church as it will be going forward. Perhaps, like Peter, we're being weaned from the cultural captivity and institutional inertia of the church as a structure. New and different models of what it means to be church are emerging in some surprising ways. The paradigm of church that brought us to faith and that nurtured us in faith isn't as compelling as it once was. Which doesn't mean that the message has changed, just that some of what has built around it has come to obscure it.

The resurrection changed everything, and its effect is an ongoing process in the world. Meaning that, as ever, Christ followers are preeminently people of trust going forward with the Holy Spirit leading new expressions of life. May we be people who are astonished in a positive sense, welcoming the Spirit's work as we discover what is emerging in our time quickened by the power of Christ's resurrection. AMEN