

Easter

Shortly after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter travelled the Mediterranean coastland from Joppa down to Caesarea in order to visit Cornelius, a centurion and a gentile. He and Peter each had a vision the night before, so when some of Cornelius's servants knocked on Peter's door, he agreed to make the trip.

Today's first reading is the catechesis Peter gave Cornelius. We hear it today because its centerpiece is the resurrection of Jesus. Acts of the Apostles gives us several examples of speeches that Peter, John and Paul made during these days. In some of them the apostles address the very people who arrested Jesus and put him to death, so those speeches include some finger-wagging. Cornelius had nothing to do with the death of Jesus, but now he was curious.

Peter starts with what Cornelius and everybody knew: It began when John baptized Jesus; God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power. Then Peter says of Jesus' ministry, "He went about doing good." This is an amazingly simplistic summary. Jesus healed the sick, preached encouragement, called disciples, raised people from the dead, and Peter summarizes all of this for Cornelius with the words, "He went about doing good." Apparently this was enough to set Jesus apart from everyone else, every other religious or political leader. Everybody knew this much, but not everybody believed.

So Peter reveals the stark disconnection between Jesus' life and his death: "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree." It makes no sense for a good person to suffer horrific death. Peter drives home the point we need to hear this Easter day: "This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible... to us... who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

Because of Peter, Cornelius comes to believe in Jesus' resurrection. But Peter explores something more. He probes what this meant for Jesus and what it means for us. For Jesus, Peter says, God appointed him "as judge of the living and the dead." The resurrection bestowed new responsibilities on Jesus: He is now the judge.

What does it mean for us? Peter makes two points. One is Jesus "commissioned us to... testify that he is the one appointed by God," and Peter says, "everyone who believes in [Jesus] will receive forgiveness of sins." The resurrection does not simply express God's mighty power to raise from death to new life, though it does that. It also expresses God's mighty power to forgive our sins today. Some of our past actions may still bother us. We may fear God could never forgive something we've done. But, according to Peter, belief in the risen Jesus forgives sins. Jesus is the judge who pardons.

Peter described the group of disciples as those "who ate and drank with [Jesus] after he rose from the dead." This also describes us. Whenever we come together for Mass, we are eating and drinking with Jesus after he rose from the dead. He forgives our sins. He also commissions us to preach and testify who he is. If your Easter faith has drawn you here today, praise God. This celebration encourages us through every trial to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God. We can do it because of this joyful news: Christ is risen, and we are forgiven.