

**Easter People: Faithfully Responsive**  
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
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*Acts 11:1-18*

Today we continue our sermon series based on stories from the book of Acts that give us a glimpse into characteristics of what I would call Easter People—people whose lives reflect the power and priorities of the risen Christ. As I said a few weeks ago, it can take a while for Easter to sink in, and today's text from Acts is indicative of this. Peter, who, in the text Pastor Susan preached on last week came to Joppa raised Tabitha from the dead, remained there for some days at the home of Simon the tanner. Tanners took the hide off of dead animals, so they would have been considered unclean people. In the chapter before our reading for today, Peter has a vision, which leads him to respond favorably to the request of some Gentile men who show up at the door of Simon's house. These three servants of Roman centurion named Cornelius ask Peter to accompany them to their master's home—and when he does, Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit and is baptized. This was something brand new in the history of the early church. Baptizing a gentile, a non-Jews. Our passage begins with Peter retelling, for the believers in Jerusalem, why he went to Cornelius house in the first place.

*Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'*

On the morning of the day that the three men showed up at the house of Simon the Tanner looking for him, Simon Peter knew what he believed about himself, he knew what he believed about God, and he knew what he believed about Gentiles like the Roman centurion Cornelius. Gentiles were not part of his ethnic and religious tradition, his group. Oh, **some** of them were okay, as far as that went. They could be kind, and even generous. He'd seen that. There was even evidence that some of them prayed to the God of Israel in their way. Good for them. But you wouldn't want to take it too far. The tradition was very clear about that. You kept to your own kind.

There **was** that little incident where Jesus encountered the Syro-Phoenician woman, who begged him to heal her child, and he did. But didn't Jesus say right before that that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and that it wasn't fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs? It was only after the woman said, "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table," that Jesus changed his mind about healing her son.

Oh the tradition was very clear about who ate with who, who was in and who was out, and what you were supposed to eat and not eat in the first place. It was clear, it was very clear, that you weren't supposed to eat with Gentiles, no matter how kind and well-intentioned they were, in part because they ate forbidden food. Biblical law was clear about the food rules, as it was about so much else. Peter knew what the Torah said.

On the morning of that day the three men showed up at the house of Simon the Tanner looking for him, Peter knew what he believed about himself and about God and about Gentiles. And then something happened. What happened was he had a vision. A waking dream. Up on the roof praying, his stomach grumbling, ready for the meal which was being prepared downstairs, Peter saw a table cloth being lowered from heaven. On that cloth were all sorts of animals a good Jewish person like him wouldn't and shouldn't eat. And a conversation ensued.

Three times, Peter heard a voice saying, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." And three times (because, after all, this is Peter we're talking about) he said, "By no means, God. I've never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." And three times, because again this is Peter we're talking about, God said to him, "What I have called clean, you must not call unclean."

Peter knew what the Torah said. He knew what the Bible said. But here in this waking dream, which—like dreams do—jumbled together his experiences, God spoke to him and called him to something different.

There in Joppa, which is where the prophet Jonah went to book passage to Tarshish to escape God's call to go to the hated people of Nineveh... There, on the rooftop of the house of a person who dealt with all sorts of dead animals and was therefore unclean... There, very aware of his own hunger, which might have made him more aware of the hunger of others, whether that be physical or spiritual, Peter heard God speak to him in a dream. So when Cornelius' men showed up, Peter adapted to changing circumstances and he was ready to respond.

That morning Peter knew what he believed about himself, and about God, and about food, and about Gentiles, and whether Roman centurions, even those hungry for good news, were ultimately acceptable to God. But by that afternoon something had changed. He'd had a vision. Easter had begun to sink in a little more. In that regard, I don't think it's an accident that in the vision Peter hears God's voice telling him *Rise, Peter, kill and eat. Rise, Peter, kill and eat. Rise, Peter, kill and eat.*

Rise is a resurrection word. It's the same Greek word that is used to talk about Jesus rising from the dead. The same word as in *He is risen, just as he said.*

Peter's mind was changed, about himself and about food, and about Gentiles, and about who was ultimately acceptable to God, but he still had to convince the others as to why. So he goes back to Jerusalem and tells the other believers what happened. He goes beyond his vision to share what he experienced after he went to Cornelius house and watched the Holy Spirit do her work in that place and in Cornelius and his family.

This story represents an inflection point in the development of the early church and it has continued to do its resurrection work in those who have had to change and adapt to changing circumstances and new understandings over the centuries. It is a testimony to the truth that Easter people are, or aspire to be, faithfully responsive in an ever-changing world.

Last year about this time, I had the privilege of hearing Father Richard Rohr speak at the Festival of Homiletics which was held here in DC. He spoke about how minds change.

There at the National Cathedral, knowing that he was addressing about 1800 pastors from various religious traditions, he started with the Methodists for a moment. He talked about what is known as the Wesleyan quadrilateral. The quadrilateral takes into account four things in making decisions—Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—and he told us that different denominations and streams of faith tend to emphasize, or at least think they emphasize, one over the others. Catholics, he said, as a Franciscan priest within that strain—tend to think they emphasize tradition. Fundamentalists, he said, tend to think they emphasize scripture. Mainline Christians, he told us, tend to think they emphasize reason and what seems rational.

But in the end, he said, the only thing that leads people to change their minds and hearts is experience....

Experience. Like the waking dream Peter has on the rooftop that prepares him to welcome the Gentile and the experience of seeing Cornelius himself come to faith. Like Jesus encountering the Syro-Phoenician woman that leads him to expand his mission out beyond just the insiders. Like Saul on the road to Damascus who is transformed by an encounter with the risen Lord and becomes Paul. What changes people's minds and hearts is experience.

Like the experience of really getting to know and try to understand someone of a different race, or religion, or political perspective. Imagine, for instance, what it would be to walk a mile in their shoes or to live just a little while in their skin. You might try that with the African-American experience. In this 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of forced migration to what became the United States, you might read books like *Native Son*, by Richard Wright or any one of hundreds of other personal accounts.

Change usually doesn't happen quite like it happened with Peter. We don't get up one morning sure of what we believe and what we're comfortable with and then have a vision and bam we're different in an instant.

More often than not it is a process. Perhaps we have an experience or a vision. Then we argue with it. We recite chapter and verse from the tradition we've received. We fall back on old ideas, we cling to what we've always known. We say things like, "This doesn't make me comfortable." Kind of like Peter does in three times saying, "I don't **care what you say**, God. I don't care what you say. I know what Torah says."

But the Living Divine keeps insisting. God keeps presenting us with people to love, people to get to know, people whose experience differs from ours, and asks us to listen.

For the early church, it was figuring out what to do with the Gentiles. Dealing with real live flesh and blood people is all more complicated and more mysterious than the defenses we set up, and the little boxes we try to put God and other people in. That's what Peter found out as Easter, the power of Love made manifest in the risen Christ, started to sink in to his life more and more. That said, the

testimony of the Book of Acts is that Peter still wrestled with it and waffled on his commitment to being open over the course of his life.

Easter people are bold, and generous, and they serve creatively, but the news today is that they are also faithfully responsive in the midst of changing circumstances. And if there is one thing certain in life, two things, actually, maybe three if you count taxes—one thing is that you're going to die, the second is, well, okay taxes, and the third thing is that life is going to change. As more than one friend of mine says, this too shall pass. If you don't like the circumstances of your life right now, they tell me, don't worry. This too shall pass. If you think everything is going great and you wouldn't change a single thing, don't worry. This too shall pass. Change is gonna come.

How do we respond faithfully in a world, in a community, in families, and in our own personal lives as things constantly change? That's the question for Easter people. Maybe part of the answer is to acknowledge that things do change, but another part of the answer is to figure out in the midst of change what is important to keep and what we can let go of.

To put it another way, we have to remember the old saying about not throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

The question in every moment of personal crisis and cultural change and theological transformation is what is the baby and what is the bathwater. For Peter and the early church, the baby was the need for compassion to living, breathing human beings like Cornelius and the bathwater was the dietary laws and the traditions that kept them divided from non-Jews. The expansive love of the living Divine called them to life and love and to the work of embracing the outsider and addressing human need.

Through it all, that's the baby we've always been called to keep. We can't ever let that go.

Compassion. Love. The work of embracing the outsider and addressing human need.

Peter woke up one morning and he knew what he believed about God, about himself, and certainly about Gentiles like Cornelius. But by the time the day was over, he was beginning to get a different perspective.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

