

## **EASTER SUNDAY MORNING**

### **Acts 10:34-43; Mark 16:1-8**

#### **Acts 10:34-43**

This story records one of the most significant moments in the life of the Church after the resurrection. The whole of the chapter is about Peter's encounter with a Gentile and the vision God gives to him about the future direction of the Church. There is a great moment when Peter enters the house of the Gentile. Peter the clean one enters the house of one who is unclean and speaks with him. But Peter has been led to this moment by God and now understands that "clean" and "unclean" are human terms that mean nothing to God. For the Almighty, such divisions do not exist and cannot exist in his Kingdom.

As Cornelius speaks with Peter it becomes clear in Peter's mind that God is speaking to him and that God is leading him to this climactic moment. He now understands that what makes a person righteous is not whether or not he or she belongs to a particular race, or worships in a particular way or follow a particular set of customs and practices. What makes a person righteous is faith. As he says, "God is no respecter of appearances". What God values is whether or not a person loves him and obeys him.

Peter is now sure that the fundamental message of Jesus was that peace and reconciliation between individuals and nations is now possible through the death and resurrection of his Lord. Jesus did not just come to free the Jews from their sins and offer to them a new and lasting life. This gift of forgiveness and new life is something that is on offer to all peoples, at all times and so Peter is sent to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. What a shock that was to the Jewish Christians who felt they were somehow special! It was such a shock that they called a special meeting of the whole Church in Jerusalem to deal with this scary innovation and presumably to chastise those who initiated it.

In today's reading we have Peter's final missionary sermon and what a great sermon it is! He begins by proclaiming Jesus Christ to be Lord of all and judge of all. He traces the life and ministry of Jesus back to his baptism by John and takes Cornelius through the great moments in his life, ending up with his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection after three days. Then, and this must have been a great shock to his Jewish companions, Peter says that this same Jesus is a saviour to the whole of creation, Jews and Gentiles alike and that this is the message at the heart of the preaching of the prophets.

For Luke, the author of the Book of the Acts, the resurrection of Jesus has made him Lord of all men and women, the ruler of all of the human situations and circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is in the power of the dead and risen Lord that we have the guarantee of the forgiveness of sins and the offer of eternal life. In the dead and risen Lord there are no more in groups and out groups, no more unclean people, no more outsiders, no more people who are beyond the love and forgiveness of God. In the dead and risen Lord we are all brothers and sisters and we are called to live together in fellowship despite our differences.

This is why this Easter morning story is so refreshing because it does two things. It reminds each one of us that we are loved intensely by God. He loved us enough to give us his Son Jesus Christ, even though we abused that Son, turned our backs on him and nailed him to a tree. God still loves us and nothing can diminish or take away that love. Thank you Lord!

The other thing the Easter story does for us is remind us of our commitment to reach out to the "Corneliuses" in our community. These are the people we consider to be un-loveable, the people we continually ignore, those we dislike and whom we feel have done us wrong. Those we malign, harm and plot revenge. These are the ones towards whom the death and resurrection of Jesus propels us. Peter was dragged out of his comfortable Jewish enclave by his vision and led to minister to the Gentiles and today's feast demands nothing less of us.

#### **Mark 16:1-8**

Mark's account of that first Easter morning is beautiful in its simplicity and powerful in its message. He begins with the women making their way to the garden in which Jesus was laid and their discussion says it all: *Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?* They did not believe in the resurrection. They believed that Jesus was dead and were simply coming along to complete the burial rituals they did not have time to complete earlier.

This is part of Mark's message for his Church: Do we believe that Jesus is truly risen from the grave? Our belief in the Risen Lord needs to be much more than just an acceptance of an historical event. If Jesus is risen, then life changes. It must change. If he is risen and is the Lord of all, then everything we do, think and say must in some way be measured in terms of our Lord. If he is Risen then he is with us now, in each and every moment of our lives. And, if he is risen, we need to be able to present our actions and our plans, our motives and our words to him believing that he is seeing them, hearing them and judging them. For Mark that is what the resurrection means. God has made Jesus Lord of all – not just Lord of what we will allow him to be Lord of. That is scary for all of us.

The stone in front of the tomb can often represent the difficulties we have in believing that Jesus is with us in the grave like circumstances of our own lives. There can sometimes seem to be blocks between us and the loving mercy of God. What Mark is saying though is that there is no stone. It has been rolled away and so we always, in all circumstances have access to the Risen Lord who has conquered the grave and so will lead us to conquering all that holds us down and fills us with dread. For Mark's community, which was going through a tough time of persecution and martyrdom, this was a comforting message of hope.

"Fear not" the angels said to the women. That is a constant message of the Risen Lord. It seems that each time he appears to his followers, he assures them that his Peace is with them. Jerusalem has not changed. The Romans are still in charge and daily criminals are crucified on the outskirts of the town but they can know Peace. What a challenge that was for Mark's community, to believe that in the midst of their trials, Peace was possible. This Peace came not from an absence of things that might harm us and upset us, but it is a Peace that comes from living our lives in Christ. It is as simple as that. If we are living in Christ we are men and women who live in a state of Peace and who bring that Peace to all that they do in the world. If we are not men and women of Peace and if we are not bringers of Peace then it is clear that we are not living in Christ. Where Christ is, there is Peace.

Mark's final message to us on this Easter morning comes from the response of the women to the great message of the angel: *they said nothing because they were afraid.* I am sure that for Mark, as it is for the Church of today, the greatest obstacle to the spread of the Gospel is the fear of believers and their willingness to "say nothing". The great temptation is to turn our faith in Jesus Christ into a personal religion, something we keep to ourselves and share only in a limited way in our religious gatherings. You do not find this in the New Testament and certainly not in the Acts of the Apostles.

Jesus is Risen. We are forgiven. Men and women are once again made whole and community life is transformed. If we believe that, then it is a message that is worth sharing, worth telling, worth inviting others in to share. But it is all a matter of faith. Just how much we are prepared to believe and just how much we are willing to allow our lives to be changed by that belief.

## **Conclusion:**

The events of Easter have changed the whole of creation and all human history. The world is no longer the same because of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the only thing that stops it from realizing its full potential is human frailty. Our inability to live as though the message of salvation was real is the stumbling block to a new world. And this is why it is so tough living out what Easter means, for it means facing our own limitations and weaknesses and allowing for the possibility of God transforming us.

But it is a message of hope for us and for our world because with the invitation to new life comes the graces and gifts we need to make that new life a reality. We do not have to live with our limitations and sins. God can and does move us on beyond these – if we allow him to. Easter is about allowing God to change our lives by the absurdity of the cross. Just as out of Golgotha God brought new life, as he changed the grave from a prison of death to a path of eternal life, so he can and will change us. He will do it..... if we wish to

be transformed. He will do it.....if we seek new life. He will do it.....if we believe that we can be made whole and the world become a community of Peace. He will do it.....if we live as though this story were true.

That is the invitation of today. The rest is up to us.