

## FAITH HEALING: ALWAYS BEING HEALED

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Acts 10:34-43

The passage from Acts that I read a moment ago is a sermon. Yes, a sermon. So, if you feel that hearing one sermon meets your quota for today then feel free to play with your phone or go check on lunch.

This sermon—this particular sermon—was delivered by the apostle Peter sometime after Jesus’s crucifixion. Peter—also known as Simon Peter—was one of Jesus’ twelve disciples and a leader of the early church. His sermon is an exquisite summary of the Jesus message. I have no doubt that Peter preached variations of this sermon dozens—if not hundreds of times—as he traveled among communities as an evangelist for the emerging gospel of Christ. If you ever need to explain to someone the roots of our faith, then I would highly recommend using this sermon as a resource. (Not my sermon, but Peter’s sermon).

In this sermon, Peter explains that it was God who sent Jesus to bring a word of peace for the people of Israel, and that Jesus was not just a messenger, but was *Lord of all*. Peter describes how this message spread throughout Judea, how *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power*; and with this power he went about *doing good and healing* people, helping those *who were oppressed by the devil*. Peter reminds his listeners that he and his associates were eyewitnesses to Jesus’ acts in Judea and Jerusalem. Although Jesus was executed, on the third day God raised him back to life and allowed him to appear to a few chosen people who themselves would also serve as witnesses to his life and message. Peter was among them. Jesus ate and drank with these people and he commanded them to go out and preach and testify that he reigns over all things—both *the living and the dead*. Peter explains that even the prophets who had gone before knew of Jesus and testified in their day that *everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name*.

As I said, this is a powerful sermon, and on this Easter Sunday it could stand alone as our message. It encapsulates the heart of our Christian belief. It is a reminder of Christ’s death and the resurrection we celebrate this day. However, there is a crucial context to this sermon that makes it even more significant for us. This context is a much larger story that we find here in the Book of Acts. It is actually one of the more complex stories in the Bible taking place simultaneously in two locales.

The first locale is the city of Caesarea Maritima. This was a Roman port near Jerusalem constructed by Herod and named for Caesar Augustus. It is the location of Herod’s palace. As we read in the Book of Acts, in Caesarea, there lived a Roman

centurion named Cornelius. As a centurion, he would have commanded one hundred Roman soldiers. Cornelius worships Yahweh, the God of Israel. He is described as being *a devout man who along with those in his household feared God. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.* Despite his belief in God, he was not a Jew. Jews didn't have a ready mechanism for accepting converts. Being a Jew normally meant being a descendant of one of the twelve tribes, adhering to the dietary laws, and, if a male, being circumcised. Although Cornelius was drawn to and worshiped the God of the Jews, he himself was not Jewish. He was a Gentile.

One afternoon, while in prayer, Cornelius has a vision in which an angel tells him to send for a man named Peter who is presently a short distance away in the city of Joppa. Cornelius dispatches three of his men to fetch Peter.

The next day, while those men are traveling toward Joppa, Peter is waiting for his lunch to be prepared. While he waits, he goes up onto the roof to pray. While praying, he has a vision. In his vision he observes this massive cloth lowered from heaven by its four corners. And contained in this cloth are all manner of living creatures—all of them animals that Jews regarded as unclean, prohibited by Jewish dietary laws. A voice says, *Get up, Peter; kill and eat.* Peter refuses and says, *By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.* After all, he is observant of his faith. The voice replies, *What God has made clean, you must not call profane.* This is repeated three times and then the cloth is retracted into heaven.

While Peter is trying to sort out what has just happened, Cornelius' men arrive and the Holy Spirit commands Peter to go with them. Peter and some other believers follow the men back to Caesarea where they are welcomed warmly by Cornelius at his home. Cornelius invites his friends and relatives and household together to meet Peter.

Once everyone is present, Peter reminds them that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with Gentiles in this manner. However, God has recently shown him otherwise. No longer is he to consider any person as being unworthy or unclean, this would include these Gentiles, even an officer in the Roman army.

With the crowd gathered, Peter begins to preach. He starts off by saying, *I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.*

This statement may not seem like much to us, but it represents a monumental shift in the attitude of the early church toward Gentiles. It charts a new course for the followers of Christ. Peter is a Jew, and he recognizes the message that Jesus brought to Israel. Jesus is Israel's savior. Peter and others worry that by accepting these outsiders into the faith that their own heritage might be diluted. But the vision Peter had of the great cloth filled with unclean animals has changed his

perspective. If God declares something to be clean, then who is Peter (or anyone) to say otherwise? The Gentiles must be welcomed into the fold.

And that is how Peter begins his address to Cornelius' household by saying, *I truly understand that God shows no partiality*. The word translated *understand* literally means "to grab hold of." We might read it as Peter saying, "I get it; It get it that God shows no partiality." Furthermore, the tense of the verb implies a process. What Peter is really saying is, "I am in the process of getting it; I am in the process of understanding." This change in Peter's outlook is not instantaneous, but rather something Peter will work through. It will take time.

During this season of Lent, I have been preaching this series of sermons titled Faith Healing. Each week, we've looked at stories of healing and asked what we might learn from them. (If you've missed any of these sermons, they are all available on the church website. My personal favorite is the one called *Belief and Unbelief* about Jesus healing the boy possessed by a demon.)

It is not obvious, but our reading for today is also a story of healing. Here, it is Peter that is healed. He is healed of his old bias against the Gentiles, his belief that they are not worthy of the gospel message, his prejudice that they are unclean. But that changes here, and it comes at a crucial time as the gospel message is beginning to gain traction beyond Jerusalem and Judea. It is no accident that Peter goes to the Roman city of Caesarea to meet with a Roman convert. In time, the Roman church would become the epicenter of the Christian world.

Over the past year, because of COVID, as a church, we've been forced to retreat in upon ourselves limiting our activities and curtailing our contact. Now that vaccines for this virus are becoming more readily available (and I urge all of you to get your vaccine as soon as you can), I see us being able to roll back the stone from our door and fully re-engage the world. It is my prayer that we will do so as people who have suffered and yet have been healed, and that we strive to greet each person in this world with the same impartiality as expressed by God. Like Peter and the others, we must be witnesses and break down the barriers between people and share the gospel of Jesus Christ will all the world. As witnesses, we must also live that gospel and allow the Holy Spirit to work through us bringing healing to the oppressed in this world. Let us be the witnesses to the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who we recognize as Lord of all.

On this Easter Sunday, we gather in worship to celebrate the glorious miracle of the resurrection. By raising Christ, God proclaimed God's power over death itself. The ultimate barrier has been knocked down. God took the broken, lifeless body of Jesus and God healed it and God raised it up as a sign to us all.

Through Lent, we've been looking at these many accounts of healing. Over and over, in each of these stories we have marveled at God's power. With God's power,

Jesus healed paralytics, those possessed with demons, the blind, the deaf, those afflicted with leprosy—those who are broken. As witnesses of these acts, we should never be surprised at God's power. If God can heal death, then God can certainly heal us.

And that is the glorious message on this Easter Sunday, that there is nothing that stands between our salvation and God. God has broken down the barriers; God has rolled away the stone; God has emptied the tomb so that we might go out into the world renewed and live the life of salvation.

Amen.