

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
The Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day
April 24, 2011

NEW LIFE BEFORE YOU (Acts 10:34-43)
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When I was Rector of Christ Church in Lockport, New York, I had a parishioner named Dr. Edward Gay. Ed was a dentist and lifelong resident of Lockport. When I first met Ed, he was nearly eighty years of age and a member of the search committee that recommended my call to Christ Church. We became close over the years that I served in that congregation, and Ed and his wife lived two houses down the street from us.

Ed was one of the most politically conservative people I had ever met. Part of his daily routine was to gather for morning coffee with a group of men in a downtown office building. Among that group was a man named William Miller, another lifelong resident of Lockport and a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

I'm wondering . . . does the name William Miller mean anything to any of you here this morning? He does have a place in the history books of the United States. Bill Miller, you see, ran for Vice President of the United States in 1964. The other name on the ticket was Barry Goldwater. Let's just say that, in 1964, the Republicans apparently were *not* looking to offer a balanced ticket.

Ed Gay once related the content of one of those early morning coffee sessions to me. It seemed that Ed himself was holding forth on one of his pet gripes about the federal government. You would have to have known Ed to understand fully how passionately he felt about things. But I'm sure that he made his point with great articulateness and not without a certain amount of frankness bordering on brutality. He ended his diatribe by saying, "And I know that *everybody* agrees with me!"

And everyone at the table shook their heads in agreement . . . everyone, that is, but Bill Miller. Miller said to Ed, "No, Ed. Everyone doesn't agree with you . . . or us."

Ed responded, "Ah, come on, Bill. How can you say that? We sit here every morning and talk about this stuff. I've heard how we all feel. Everyone does agree with me!"

"That's your problem, Ed," said Bill Miller. "You're listening to the wrong people. Yes, we sit here every morning and talk about all sorts of things. We agree on most everything we talk about. *But there are a whole lot of people out there who don't think the way we do, and don't experience things the way we do.* And we need to listen to them too. That's how we learn."

Ed Gay later told me how very important that moment was in his life. It was a moment when the world opened up to him in a way that formerly had been closed. It was a moment that opened up a new life to Ed Gay. I truly believe that it was the moment that allowed Ed Gay and me to respect each other and to be friends—even though we didn't agree on many things. And it was a moment that enabled me to weep, for first his wife and then for Ed, when I officiated at their funerals some years later.

I cannot help but think of Ed Gay and Bill Miller when I reflect on this morning's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. This is a story that tells of new life—actually many new lives.

Unfortunately, the creators of our lectionary have done us a grave disservice by having us read these verses out of context. What comes immediately before these verses is the story of how Cornelius—a Roman commander of many soldiers, representing the hated, occupying Roman oppressors—was visited by an angel who tells him to send for Simon Peter who will, in turn, tell him all about Jesus of Nazareth.

We also miss the story of Peter's own vision, and a fantastic one it is. Peter sees a great sheet lowered from heaven. The sheet is filled with all sorts of animals considered "unclean" to eat by devout Jews. A voice from heaven says to Peter, "'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven."¹

Here in this chapter of the Acts of the Apostles we have the quintessential story of the *effect* of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We have here the story of two conversions: that of Cornelius (and his whole Roman household) to faith in Christ . . . and that of Peter to the gospel's inclusion of Gentiles—that the saving act of Christ Jesus is not just for Jesus' own people, the Jews, but also to the whole world—of which we today gathered here are direct beneficiaries.

This is a story that shows that we need to listen to each other . . . to our questions, to our beliefs, to our experiences. Cornelius could not understand the story of Jesus without listening to and talking with Peter. And he himself had a vision that Peter needed to hear. Peter, on the other hand, "could not understand the radical meaning of his vision of the sheet full of unclean animals until he was sent to the house of the God-fearing Roman military officer Cornelius."² Moreover, he had first-hand knowledge about Jesus that Cornelius needed to hear.

It is then, following the beginnings of the relationship between these two so-very-different men, that Peter speaks the words with which this morning's reading begins: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."³ This "story reminds us of how we need each other's experiences and visions of resurrection—even those of our enemies—in order to grasp God's big picture."⁴ What a concept! What a vision of possibilities for the human race . . . for our families . . . for our work places . . . *for our Church*. Talk about "new life before you!"

Again, since these verses are taken out of context, we miss the results of this important—dare I say "miraculous?"—meeting. Hear these words from Acts that immediately follow: "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues

¹Acts 10:13b-16).

²Barbara R. Rossing in Harold W. Rast, ed., *New Proclamation, Year A, 2005* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 3. The exegesis of the biblical text for this sermon follows Dr. Rossing.

³Acts 10:34-35.

⁴Rossing, *op. cit.*, 4.

and extolling God. Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”⁵

You may have noticed that I have said little about Easter and find that somewhat peculiar considering what day it is. You’re right. This year I’m assuming that you know the story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What I’m not assuming this year is that you know the “so what?” That’s why I’ve emphasized the Cornelius and Peter story. It has much to teach us as we continue to struggle with all sorts of “us” and “them” issues.

I’d like to tell you that, as a result of the historic meeting of the Roman and the Jew, everyone lived happily ever after. I cannot do that. Peter continued to struggle with his feelings about Gentiles. Even after he went back to his Jewish community to persuade them of the legitimacy of Cornelius’ conversion, he was confronted by St. Paul for “backsliding” and hypocrisy. Being open to relationship with those with whom we disagree—perhaps even consider the enemy—*is hard work!*

But I will tell you this, two of my closest clergy friends back in Illinois were people with whom I disagreed on “hot button issues.” One was a Mennonite, a true pacifist for whom force and violence, no matter the circumstances, is unacceptable. I, as you may know, spent twenty years on active duty in the United States Marine Corps. My friend and I profoundly disagreed on the use of military force. But we talked to each other. We listened to each other. We prayed together. We broke bread together. It can be done.

New life before you. That is what the resurrection is about. Resurrection life requires giving up old, cherished notions of reality. It requires that we cross some old boundaries (like Jesus crossed the boundary between death and life).

It is scary. But remember, behind you there are two thousand years of experience in doing so—starting with Peter and Cornelius.

⁵Acts 10:44-48a.