

Acts 10:34-43**Jesus died and rose again for you**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

From a young age, we're usually encouraged to make choices and develop preferences for things like colours and food and footy teams and TV shows and the like. All these things begin to form part of our identity. When you meet someone new you often want to find out which of their preferences matches yours. This can be quite helpful in establishing a connection and making someone feel welcome and valued.

The problems begin when these choices, these preferences, these favourites, become the means for establishing a hierarchy. Of course, my preferences are the best, and so if yours don't match up then I guess I must be better than you. This can be devastating to the relationships within a family or classroom or workplace, and even with the church. And in the days of the early church, this struggle was very present.

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, one of the biggest challenges that the disciples faced was that gentiles were believing in Jesus. Now the people of Israel had been set apart by God as his chosen nation. The Messiah was their Messiah. Even at the ascension of Jesus, the disciples were still asking, "Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The people of God had waited for centuries to be free from conquering empires including Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and now, Rome. That was supposed to be the work of the messiah.

So then, what was the purpose of a messiah who didn't rescue God's people from Roman oppression or a resurrection that demonstrates the power of God without freeing the people? This was a question that the early church wrestled with, and it took a miraculous vision from God and an encounter with a believing gentile for the apostle Peter to begin to understand it. Our reading from Acts today is part of Peter's conversation with Cornelius, the Roman centurion. And Peter says, "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." The message at the heart of the little Easter sermon that Peter then preaches is that Jesus is Lord of all and died and rose again for all people.

What this means is that what Jesus achieved on the cross wasn't limited to God's favourites. He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And so put me in front of anyone in the world, absolutely anyone, and I could say to them without any doubt whatsoever, "Jesus died and rose again for you." Whoever you are, wherever you're from, regardless of your faith or lack thereof, regardless of your language or ancestry, and regardless of much less important things like your favourite footy team or favourite colour, it is absolutely true that Jesus died and rose again for you.

Now in many cases, this truth will not be heard or believed. But that doesn't make it any less true. And it doesn't mean that it shouldn't be told. Honestly, we do expect that some will react in complete disbelief, thinking the whole thing sounds like nonsense. This was even the reaction of some who followed Jesus and heard his teaching and saw his miracles. It should not at all surprise us that even those who should understand, just don't get it.

When the women found the empty tomb and returned to the disciples in the upper room, it says that the apostles "did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." Now we don't know precisely what the women said. The passage simply says they told them "all these things". Did they talk about how frightened they were when they saw that the stone had already been removed? Did they describe the men in clothes like lightning? Did they repeat the 'sermon' these men preached to them? Did any of them really remember what Jesus had told them—that he would be "handed over to sinners ... crucified ... and on the third day rise again" (Luke 24:7)?

Whatever they did or didn't say and did or didn't remember, the events of that first Easter morning changed everything. It took them a while to figure this all out. So much of what Jesus did and said was unexpected. This is really the entire story of God's relationship with us, his creation. From the beginning, we have been challenged to see the unexpected and the impossible. God is always doing new things. Out of a formless void came light, water, and dry land. From the dust of the earth, God made a living and breathing human. Scripture tells us that "the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat, the calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion" (Isaiah 11:6, NLT) In the Exodus, God led his people through the Red Sea on dry land (Exodus 14:29). And at Christmas time, we celebrate that the eternal Word became flesh to dwell among us (John 1:14).

All these things can only be grasped through faith. And this faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, given where and when the Spirit pleases, without partiality or favouritism. And it's not on us to decide to limit that because we're convinced that certain people will never believe. The challenge of celebrating Easter, of rejoicing at the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead, is to have the courage to proclaim this news far and wide.

Perhaps we could take encouragement from the group of women who arrived to find the tomb empty on that first Easter morning. Despite not fully comprehending what they had seen and heard, they had to return and tell their friends. They had amazing news to share even if those listening thought it was nonsense. But through the work of the Spirit, the disciples began to believe that Jesus was truly risen from the dead. For some, it would take miraculous encounters with the risen Lord. But soon the church was alive with hope and with the good news that Jesus lives. The message had to be proclaimed.

The good news that Jesus died and rose again for you needed to be told to everyone who would listen. It might not have an immediate impact, but that didn't matter. God was at work in this world, bringing salvation and rescuing people from the oppression of sin. The price for sin had been paid, death had been conquered, and the world had been set free. Jesus lives, and he calls his church to proclaim that truth throughout the ages, to proclaim it far and wide, without any partiality or favouritism, so that all people may hear the good news: "Jesus died and rose again for you."

So may the joy of our Easter celebrations inspire you to share the good news that "Jesus lives, death is defeated, sin is forgiven, and life eternal has been won". Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed.* Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.