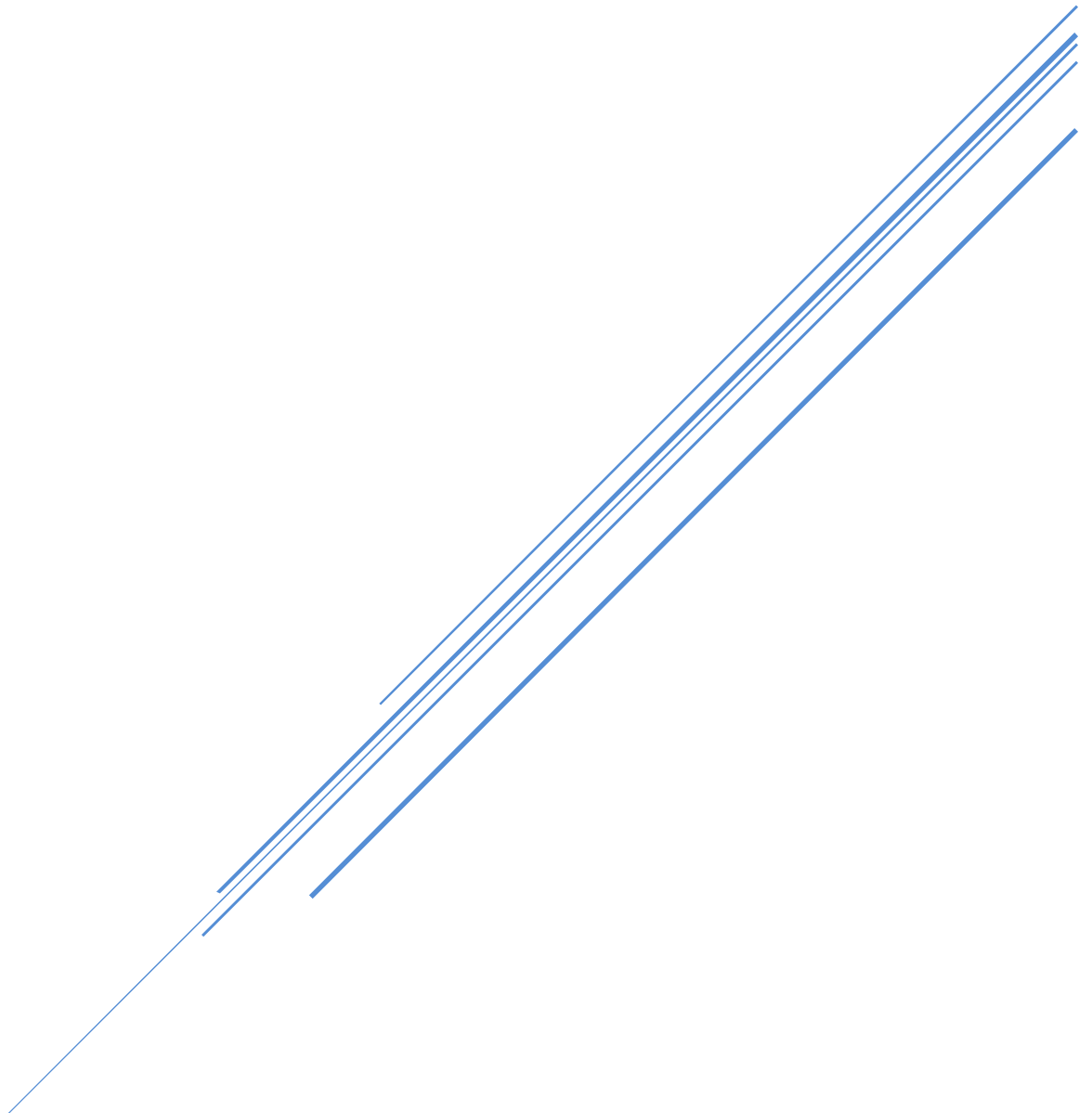


# FOR ALL OF US!

Acts 10 & Easter



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A florist mixed up a couple of orders one busy day. One was supposed to go to a business' grand opening, while the other was for a funeral. The next day the owner of the new business came storming into the shop. "What's the big idea?" he railed. "The flowers you sent for our reception said, 'Rest in Peace.'"

The florist apologized and he said, trying to hide a smirk, "If you think that's bad, you should've seen the people at the funeral when they saw what their flowers said -- 'Good luck in your new location!'"

And for some people that's all Easter is: the reaffirmation that there is a life after death. Maybe even a Heaven -- not that that's a bad thing -- But surely there's more to Easter than that. There must be more to Jesus resurrection -- from death! -- than a confirmation that I'll get to go sit on a cloud after I die and play the harp for eternity.

Most people are familiar with the story of Easter. Jesus was a traveling preacher from some podunk town on the far eastern fringe of the Roman Empire. Well, he decided to take on the arrogant ideology of the Roman 'Emperor Cult.'

Basically, what happened was this: Octavian defeated Anthony and Cleopatra in 31 BCE and declared himself emperor, which brought about the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire. While he brought about a long lasting peace, the *pax Romana* was an enforced peace. Live peacefully or go to jail!

The citizens were grateful I suppose, probably thinking, "Thank God! Praise Augustus! He must be divine!" Octavian, who seemed to enjoy his new divine status, changed his name to Augustus. Then he decided that, since he was emperor, he would be God, the Son of God, redeemer, savior, and Lord. All Romans everywhere were expected to worship him, as such.

Timing is everything. During the reign of the next Emperor, Tiberius, Jesus shows up. And it's a lot like the story of the movie *The Matrix*. In the movie, humanity has been relegated to serving only as components in a huge machine. They feed the machine - literally. There was a prophecy, though, about a Messiah who would come and liberate humanity from their oppression. Sound familiar?

Keanu Reeves played the part of the savior, Neo “the One” Anderson – Anderson, btw, means son of man as *Andros* is Greek for man, or humanity. Coincidence? I think not.

Unlike Neo, however, Jesus wasn’t into fighting back or martial arts or mind-blowing special effects, as cool as that might be....

Jesus’ way of fighting back was basically civil disobedience – outright rejection of any powers that dared to appropriate God’s power in God’s world.

Those false powers were creating systems that put all the power and property in the hands of a few, oppressing the masses, turning them into tenant farmers and sharecroppers indebted to loan sharks and tax collectors. Those false powers created a system where women had no voice or legal standing, treated simply as property. Those false powers created systems that enslaved other humans, justified denigrating and exploiting the poor, sent the young to fight in unnecessary wars, and made Gods of the world leaders instead of God.

But Jesus didn’t use the world’s ways against the world. Jesus’ way was a nonviolent way. He taught that the world’s powers have no power; that the real power is in God and that the Kingdom of God is at hand -- here now. He reached out to the people society had rejected. He invited people to change their way of thinking so they could break free and start living life abundantly – in community – sharing and loving and turning away from the ruling system that oppressed them.

Now, this frightened the false powers. So the “Empire Struck back, if you will. They had Jesus arrested, beaten, and executed. There’s a Japanese proverb that says, “The nail that rises up gets hammered back down.” Take that, you radical! That’ll teach you to teaching love and community. Jesus was dead and the disciples – the men anyway -- ran and hid in fear. End of story.

Except it wasn’t quite the end, was it? God seemed to feel that that was not the end and resurrected Jesus. Back to life!

There must be more to this than just a guaranteed placement in heaven after we die. What about before we die? What about the kingdom of heaven being right here among us?

There's a story of a painting by Moritz Retzsch titled, "The Game of Life" or "the Chess Players." In it, a young man and the devil are apparently battling for young man's soul over a game of chess. The devil seems to have a look of gleeful anticipation on his face, while the young man has a look of desperation -- of an impending checkmate.

I'm sure the painting's draw is that people tend to ponder their own journeys as they look at it. Perhaps it speaks to them of their struggles or their despair.

One day a chess master came into the gallery and for the longest time simply stared at the painting. Suddenly, out the hush of the gallery, came a startling shout, "It's a lie! It's a lie," exclaimed the chess master. "The king and knight still have moves..."

That's what Easter means today -- in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We all still have moves left. As long as the Kingdom of Heaven - the reign of God - is here among us, we still have moves.

Take the other reading from this morning. The one from Acts 10.

This passage is a wonderful lesson on the implications of what God's victory over death and false powers means for us sophisticated 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians.

Luke, in his usual dramatic fashion, introduces us to Cornelius -- Roman centurion, captain of at least 100 soldiers (hence the term centurion) stationed in the coastal city and the Roman administrative capital of Judea, Caesarea.

Luke tells us that Cornelius was a "devout man who feared God with all his household, he gave alms generously... and prayed constantly to God." Cornelius was a "God-fearer" -- non-Jews who were strongly attracted to the God of Israel, supported the local Jewish community, and participated in the liturgical feasts at the Temple. It's very unlikely that he would totally convert to Judaism given the risks involved both physically and socially (It was the custom of the day for romans to spend an hour or two each day exercising and bathing in the nude). The Romans weren't too friendly toward those who refused to recognize the Emperor-God.

One day, Cornelius is visited by an angel during his regular morning prayer and meditation. His gifts and prayers have been heard by God, and Cornelius is supposed to invite a man known as Peter, who is currently in Joppa, to visit his home. Cornelius immediately sends two slaves and soldier to fetch Peter.

Meanwhile, Peter has had a vision of his own. Peter sees what Luke describes in verse 11 as “something like a sheet coming down,” and it’s filled with all manner of “four-footed creatures and snakes of the earth and birds of the air.” Then a voice commands Peter to get up and eat.

Peter, having always been a good Jewish boy, refuses. “I have never eaten anything profane or unclean.”

The voice then responds with an unprecedented claim: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” And we bible students know that it must be important, because Luke says it happened three times.

As you can imagine Peter was rather puzzled at this vision. He had just been told, in no uncertain terms to completely ignore on of the most important markers of his Jewish faith. What not to eat.

And while he’s still in mid-puzzle, Cornelius three men – two gentile strangers and Roman soldier -- show up asking for him. Fortunately, the Spirit reassures Peter that these men are ok and he should, in fact, go with them back to Caesaria and Cornelius.

When Peter arrived, Cornelius fell at his feet – as if Peter were some kind of divine being himself. “Stand up,” he says, “I am only a mortal.” Cornelius invites Peter into the house where many had assembled -- apparently Cornelius had invited a bunch of family and friends – and Peter begins his ‘sermon’ – because that’s what it was, and his message that day reflects his new understanding of his vision back in Joppa.

“You yourselves know,” he begins, “that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile....”

And I can imagine a wave of perplexed muttering rippled through the crowd – which was probably mostly Gentiles, with a few members of the Jewish

community present as well. They knew Peter was right, mixing with the 'other' was forbidden by Jewish law – so what was Peter doing here?

But Peter continues, "...God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." And with that one sentence, Peter brings to an end the separation of Jew and Gentile.

You see, Peter's vision in Joppa was about much more than a lesson in the laws of Kosher -- what he should and shouldn't eat. From now on, for Peter and the whole Christian church, no one is ever to be excluded on the basis of race, or human devised distinctions. This scene in the centurion's house in Caesarea, gives us a glimpse of the Kingdom of God on earth. Peter and Cornelius, two Roman slaves, another soldier, and some gentile friends and family stand listening together to a sermon announcing the end of human separation in Christ.

Peter closes the deal, sealing the sermon's theme with these words, "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."

So Cornelius, Roman soldier, and a Gentile, stands in the same relationship to God as Peter does – as those lowly slaves do – as the people gathered around do – Jew and gentile, alike. Peter says the reason that's true is because even though "they put him to death by hanging him on a tree, God raised him on the third day."

And that is one of the reasons we celebrate Easter with lilies, and trumpets, and loud songs, and candy and eggs and hallelujah's and ham. Because God has no interest – doesn't even recognize – human distinctions and differences that we've created here on earth.

Paul really got it right in Galatians 3:28 when he wrote: "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female."

In Christ there is neither Republican nor Democrat, citizen nor undocumented visitor, gay nor straight, for all are one in Christ Jesus. So before you go sit on a cloud and play the harp, remember that because of Jesus' resurrection, we all still have moves left. That's reason enough to sing on Easter!