

God's Impartiality
The Rev. Amy Spagna
Easter Day – April 20, 2025
Acts 10:34-43

*He who was nailed to the cross is Lord and the ruler of nature;
all things created in him sing to the glory of God:
Hail thee, festival day! Blest day that art hallowed for ever,
day where on Christ arose, breaking the kingdom of death.¹*

This ancient hymn – and really all of the hymns in the Easter section of the Hymnal – try to capture something of the joy and the new reality of this day. The world changed for ever with Mary Magdalene's breathless announcement to the disciples: "I have seen the Lord!" In an instant, the horror and sadness of Friday are gone. They've been replaced by the sort of happiness that makes it hard to get the words to express it out – and which makes it hard to understand in any sort of rational way. Christ arose, and broke the kingdom of death, in a display of God's glory that the world has only gotten tiny glimpses of since.

Such moments of joy feel like they're hard to come by of late. However, if there is anything that Easter reminds us, it is that God cares very much about what happens to us, and that God will go to any length to save God's beloved and very often bumbling people, no matter how badly they mess things up for themselves. And that's the core of the entire story. As Peter told it to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his family, "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit

¹ Venantius Honorarius Fortunatus, "Hail Thee, Festival Day." SALVE FESTA DIES. *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Publishing, 1985), 175.

and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him... They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day" (Acts 10:38-40a, NRSV).

It's easy to imagine the room where they were gathered being so silent that one could hear a pin drop after Peter said this. It's astonishing news, no matter how many times it's broadcast. Jesus of Nazareth was killed for doing good, healing people, and speaking uncomfortable truths to the powerful. And then God turned around and raised him from the dead... for the benefit *everyone*. Sure, Peter goes to some length to make sure Cornelius understands the Jewish roots of the message he's delivering. In contrast to that particular rootedness in a specific time and place, is the message itself. Jesus is the one Cornelius has been praying for. It's a transformational moment for everyone, but especially for Peter. He realizes, perhaps for the first time, that God's message of salvation is not intended just for him and the relatively small group of people who'd sprinted to the tomb that first Easter morning to verify what Mary told them. This message is for everyone who heard Jesus' preaching God's love and peace, and believed in him.

The Resurrection demonstrates clearly that God does not play favorites. Peter's opening statement that God shows no partiality stands in direct contrast to the human tendency to favor one group over another, and to exclude based on arbitrary criteria. In God's kingdom, favoring one person or group over another and exclusion are just not the way things are done. Everyone belongs, everyone is welcome, and everyone who believes in Christ receives the benefits of forgiveness. Period. It doesn't matter whether they come from a Jewish background, like Peter, or from a foreign one, like Cornelius.

What the writer of Acts wants us to know when it comes to the role Jesus plays in God's impartiality, it's that "Jesus was really acting for God in going about doing good, and really does point to the way for people to be set free... the underlying message is one of God's generosity expressed through Jesus, which includes forgiveness and liberation."²

God's generosity and impartiality are things Peter himself had to be reminded of before he fully understood them. On his way to visit Cornelius, God presents Peter with a vision of a sheet filled with all sorts of food, and tells Peter to eat whatever he likes of it because "what God has made clean, [he] must not call profane" (Acts 10:15). It is not until Peter meets Cornelius that he realizes what this vision means. Despite his status as a foreigner, Cornelius too has received the same gift of faith in Christ as Peter himself has, demonstrating clearly that Jesus is for everyone. Peter learns in that moment that it is not up to him, or the rest of the apostles in Jerusalem, or even up to us, as their descendants, to say otherwise. Faith is enough. And in the words of Martin Luther, it lives upon no other.

The promise that God shows no partiality is a hard thing to live into. Categorizing other people is part of how we try to understand the world around us. It's how we learn who's "safe," whom we can trust, and whom we can't. And it is also how we learn that, no matter how they may differ from us, other people are no less welcome at God's table than we are. As we will reaffirm in a few moments – and which we are also collectively promising to take on, on behalf of little Sophia, today - our tasks where other people are concerned are fairly simple. We are to seek and serve Christ in them; to love them as he loves us; and to respect the dignity of every human being. Very often these things

² William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C First Reading New Testament Passages from the Lectionary: Easter Day." <https://billloader.com/CActsEaster.htm> [accessed April 16, 2025].

are easier said than done, which is why we promise to do them together, and with God's help. When we do that, and then go out into the world to put them into action, we will join Mary Magdalene, Peter, Cornelius the Centurion, and all the rest as witnesses to all that Jesus said and did – and to what God did through him to change the world for ever.