

My Friend Has A Question . . . (What do I do?)

There stood Peter, in the very position in which many believers have found themselves. It could happen on an airplane, across the desk at work, over the backyard fence, at the laundry with a neighbor from the apartment next door, even with a member of our own family. Someone says, "What do you think the deal is about Jesus, anyway?" or "What goes on at your church for people like me?" or even, "Sometimes I wonder if there even is a God, don't you?"

Some call this Peter's "sermon" in Cornelius' house. I don't know if it was really a sermon or not. There's no funny story to start things off. There is no poem to sum things up at the end. It's way too short - at least according to my standards. No, this is more like a response to a question from a friend. Like Cornelius had called Peter one day to ask to borrow his lawn mower, and their conversation drifted off into more serious matters, until Cornelius finally said, "Say, Peter, you knew that guy Jesus. What was the deal with him, anyway?" What Peter said is more like a friend explaining his associations to another friend than it was a sermon.

In the first the part Peter tells about things that happened before he had anything to do with the story. Kind of like our own family histories that tell who and where we came from. He spoke first of the people of Israel. Peter was a Jew; the people of Israel were his people. They had a long history dating back to the patriarchs, back to the Exodus, back to King David and King Solomon and Noah and Jonah and Job and Ruth and Naomi and Abraham and Sarah, and a cast of thousands, all of whom had an impact on the story long before Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, came on the scene. He knew that that story was a prelude to Jesus. Peter also knew that that story was his story as well; it was about his people. It was a story of the ways in which God had worked in the past to save them and make them a people who would be a blessing for the whole world.

Then Peter gets to the main part. It could have begun with Peter saying, "And by the time I met Jesus, here is what was happening . . ." He just tells in very brief fashion his own experiences of the way he came to know who Jesus was and what Jesus did that made him so special. They came across sick people and, just when you'd least expect it, "poof" they were healed, because Jesus was so filled with the power and presence of God. Peter's story also tells the hard part; the part the church has recounted again through the week just past, the part where Jesus was arrested and put to death on a cross. But then - who could have guessed it, though considering all they had seen with him, they had to wonder why they were surprised - God raised Jesus from death! And those who followed him knew beyond a doubt that he was alive and with them. Every time they sat down together to break bread, wow, they could just feel him there as they used to before he was crucified!

Well, they couldn't just keep news like this to themselves. So they began telling others what had happened. They opened their Bibles and suddenly - why hadn't they seen it before? - it looked as though words about who Jesus was and is were spread throughout the Bible. Everywhere they looked they saw something that made them think of him and what he had done, and what he was still doing among them. So they shared this with others too. They even began telling it to people like Cornelius, who hadn't been part of the family, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

But then Peter goes on, and this is the part that really changes things. It is the future part of the story, the part that in the fairy tales would simply say, "And they lived happily ever after." But the

future of this story, "The Story of Jesus and How He Changed My Life," was more inviting than that. Peter, by way of invitation, said, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," and ended the same way with, "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness in his name" Paul wrote much the same thing in fancier words in Romans 8: "If we know the love of Jesus, we have come to realize that nothing can separate us from the love of God." In other words, Peter tells Cornelius and all the folks in his house who are gathered there that his story can become their story too. That's how it is with the best stories anyway, isn't it? We finish by feeling as though the author had said something true about us as well as the folks in his story. That's the way Peter ends. This story is for us.

Easter is a wonderful time - not only to celebrate Christ's triumph over death, but to remember that the story is for each of us, yet not just for us alone. When the phone rings the week before Easter and some stranger on the other end asks, "What time are the Easter services at your church?" we have to remember it is Cornelius on the line. When your neighbor or co-worker, or relative asks you the same, remember it is Cornelius. This might be someone who doesn't know all the customs of our church but who is ready to hear the story. More than that, it is often someone hoping to find where he or she might have a part to play in that story. Every one of us has at one time been in Cornelius' shoes. Perhaps some of us here today are in his shoes right now, on the outside of the story, wondering if we fit in.

To all of us, Peter's words are still true: "God shows no partiality ... everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness through his name." The church is not a place where we earn our stripes and strive to earn God's love. The only reason we are together at Easter is because Jesus has made us into a fellowship of the forgiven and newly acceptable. That makes us ready and able to play the part in the story God that has in mind for us. We were baptized into this family of God, and we each have a part to play. No more important role can be found than inviting someone you know to join the family, be part of this great story.

Surely there is someone here today who has come hoping for a word that lets you know that you belong, that the story we rehearse here week after week is also your story. Well, here is that word: Believe that Jesus truly rose from the dead and accept salvation in his name.