

## **“The Tree That Held Jesus For A Time”**

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Acts 10:34-44 (also: Acts 5:27-32,  
13:26-34)

The Easter scripture I have selected for today is from the book of Acts. A man named Luke wrote this book as “Part Two” of his story about the work of God. Part One was what we call the Gospel of Luke and that book centered around Jesus’ life and ministry through his arrest, death, and resurrection.

Acts picks up the story where Part One left off and tells about how the Church began to understand the message of the resurrection, which propelled them to spread this message through the power of the Holy Spirit and grow the Church.

The Holy Spirit is God’s presence with us helping us to live as God’s people, God’s Church in the world.

I wanted to jump into the book of Acts for Easter, because it includes this deeper understanding of what the resurrection meant in the real lives of people.

The accounts in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) end with the resurrection, and a few extra details, but they don’t go a whole lot deeper, like the book of Acts, into what the resurrection meant for the world in everyday-life terms.

Part Two of Luke’s writing does this. Here we find the people in the first generation of the brand new Church wrestling with how the message of Jesus’ resurrection re-patterns their lives and the way they understood the world.

Word of Jesus’ murder and resurrection was being shared in Jerusalem and the larger region of Judea, where Jesus had spent about three years teaching about God’s new kingdom and a new way to be human. Luke described how, from this central location, the message would eventually spread into all the world.

Let me set the stage for you. In the passage I am about to read, it is Peter talking. Peter was one of Jesus’ closest friends, and followed him for several years learning from him. After Jesus’ resurrection, Peter became a leader in the first generation of the Church.

He was speaking here with a man named Cornelius, who was a

military leader of 100 Roman soldiers called the Italian Regiment. He was responsible for an important Roman military post on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in Caesarea, just north and west of Jerusalem in the land of Judea.

Cornelius was not Jewish, but nonetheless was committed to pray to God as one on the outside looking through a window at the Jewish customs and religious practices. Since he wasn't Jewish, the Jews would call him a "gentile," an outsider, and not associate with him, much less visit in his home.

But Cornelius had a vision in which God wanted him to invite Peter over. Peter also had a vision that God would include gentiles in an expanded family of God. So, Peter ended up at Cornelius' house with a crowd of Cornelius' family and close friends.

They had no idea what they were in for, but waiting for what Peter might say to them.

### **READ Acts 10:34-44**

Luke wrote that they put Jesus to death on a tree. This of course refers to the cross. We wear this symbol around our necks and have crosses as decorations in our homes. We even have several crosses in this worship space.

What we sometimes forget is that the cross (what Luke referred to as a tree) was the most painful and cruel killing device that the most powerful and ruthless military strength in the world could dream up.

This cross, this tree, was used in a very public way as a brutal attempt to silence and humiliate Jesus. That happened on the day we commemorated three days ago that is called Good Friday, when Jesus was hung up on that tree.

Peter mentioned this act of violence against Jesus. But then Peter used a little word that denotes a turn in the story. It is a little word that demonstrates what makes this story the most wonderful story that history has ever known and an occasion for great celebration.

Luke said that Jesus was killed "BUT" God raised him from the dead. In every other case the cross was the end of the road for any criminal or even innocent person who faced the power of the great and mighty Roman Empire.

BUT not this day! The cross only held Jesus for a time.

Three days after he was murdered on a tree, God's power raised Jesus from the dead!

God's power was proved greater than even the most powerful military force in the world — but God's power is a different kind of power, a game-changing power.

\* God's power is not a power of force, but a power of peace.

\* It's not a power of dominance, but of acceptance.

\* It is not a power of control, but of freedom.

\* Not a power of aggression, but a power of love.

This is why the tree could not hold Jesus. God's power was working at an altogether different level to restore and redeem what was lost or broken.

This was where, in the book of Acts, Peter took the story deeper than simply Jesus rising from the dead. What did the resurrection mean in the life of people?

One place Peter saw this power at work was that it provided access to God's family for people who previously only could watch from the outside, like Cornelius. All people now had full access to God!

This was revolutionary. It was crazy. It was a game-changer. It was for the people of Peter's day,

unthinkable — and yet God was doing this new thing!

All of the sudden, God's forgiveness was being given to the most unexpected group of people imaginable. Remember that Cornelius was a representative of the Roman Empire. The government that killed Jesus.

Perhaps Cornelius held shame and guilt over this fact.

Imagine that you are the Vice President of a world-leading technology corporation. You represent that company with international contracts and expansion into new markets across the globe. What you do and say represents the company and is backed by this corporation's power and reputation.

Imagine you learn that the company you depend on for your personal livelihood and whose entity is wrapped up in your identity, is systematically manipulating the financial economy of multiple counties in order to dominate the technology market which is leaving thousands unemployed, destitute, and even dying as a result.

Imagine the feeling of being trapped with no way out from under the association and

identification with an immoral and evil activity.

That may have been what Cornelius felt. There was no way out, BUT God changed the rules and provided a way for redemption and forgiveness. He and his family and close friends were literally being redeemed and forgiven by the one they had killed.

What part of your life feels bound up with no way out?

Perhaps you feel ashamed. Perhaps there is sin in your life you do not feel can be forgiven. The burden is heavy.

This past Tuesday, people were stopped in their tracks as news reports revealed a fire that was consuming the cathedral at Notre-Dame of Paris. This cathedral began construction more than 850 years ago in 1160, being completed 100 years later in 1260 and has stood as one of the oldest and greatest architectural structures of the world.

Beyond the beauty of the architecture, during and after the fire, what this building has meant to people has been shared. the cathedral has been a place of coronation of kings, as well as a center for both political and religious power. It has also been a

center for cultural life of the French for hundreds of years. There is literally a golden star outside the cathedral designating "Point Zero," the center of the city of France.

Perhaps you watched some of the newscasts and caught videos of people of different faiths and perhaps no faith gathering outside the burning cathedral singing hymns.

Perhaps you saw the pictures looking through the doors of the sanctuary, past the rows of pews where a glowing cross still hung at the front of the space of worship.

Those views reminded me of when I stood in a parking lot outside a church three years ago, on January 6, 2016, as a blaze was consuming the building of the church I served as pastor in Grass Lake, MI. I recall standing there shocked as flames and smoke poured out the structure and firefighters from 13 different stations fought to preserve the sanctuary.

I remember walking around the building and looking through the doors to the sanctuary, past the rows of pews and seeing a bronze cross illuminated by light pouring in through the doors, reminding us all, like it did last Tuesday in Paris, that the cross has now been redeemed

and survives as a symbol of hope in the middle of the darkest times.

The church building in Grass Lake has now been rebuilt and the Cathedral at Notre-Dame is pledged to be rebuilt in five years, in time for the Paris Olympics, funded by \$1 billion of donations that have already come in within a week.

In the midst of ashes and heartache there is always hope for rebirth. That is the story of the resurrection.

\* Where in your life do you need hope?

\* Around what do you long for forgiveness?

\* What part of your life needs to be redeemed?

The good news of Jesus' resurrection is that the power of God's love has changed all of the rules, changed the whole game and provided a way for your burden to be lifted. The barriers to healing and forgiveness have been removed. There is literally nothing that prevents you from full inclusion in God's family and being fully forgiven and free.

Jesus is risen, and that makes all of the difference!