

PETER AND THE FIVE HUNDRED



1 Corinthians 15.3 "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (that is Simon Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

This is the sixth sermon of a seven-part series that I have been preaching all this Easter Season entitled "The Witnesses to the Resurrection," a rare chance to review all these stories in the same year. Last week, we looked at the little noticed mention of a Resurrection appearance to Jesus' brother, James, who the Scriptures clearly declare did not believe in Jesus during his lifetime, but who soon after his death was the acknowledged

leader of the early church in Jerusalem! Last week, we also considered a suspected appearance to Jesus' mother, Mary, from whom Jesus seemed estranged during most of his life, until she joined his followers mourning at the Cross, staying at the home of the Beloved Disciple that sabbath, and thus she would have still been present there when Mary Magdalene brought news of the Empty Tomb to the Beloved Disciple and Peter on that first Easter Sunday morning.

Today, we are looking at the Resurrection appearance to Simon Peter and also one to five hundred brothers and sisters at one time. As with the appearance to James, there is no other known reference to the Resurrection Appearance to the five hundred, except Paul's mention here in his list, which is indeed the earliest list of Resurrection appearances that we have, dating about only 20 years after Jesus' death. Paul unfortunately does not elaborate on this story much, except to note that most of the five hundred who witnessed the Resurrected Jesus on that occasion were still alive at the time of his writing, though some had died. This recorded appearance probably took place in Galilee, where the crowds which followed Jesus tended to be larger. Even so, as significant as the number five hundred may seem, it is still only one-tenth the size of the recorded crowd for the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. Moreover, none of the participants of the appearance are named, although some were clearly known to Paul. Thus, the importance of this event

lies more with what we do not know about it, than with what we do know. The reference to this appearance is a powerful reminder of how few of the stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances have survived, and of how little information we really possess about those early days that followed the first Easter morning. Even in Paul's day some of those who counted among the five hundred have died and were gone, and their stories are lost, though most were, according to Paul, still alive at that time, still retelling their stories twenty years later.

Only a little bit more information about the aforementioned Resurrection appearance to Simon Peter is known. This appearance is noted both here by Paul and also in Luke's Gospel, which makes mention of it within the story of the Two Disciples on the Road to Emmaus, where it goes almost unnoticed. In that story, when those two disciples "got up and returned to Jerusalem to tell the others (about what had occurred), they found the eleven and their companions," we are told, "gathered together, and *they (the eleven and their companions)* were saying (to the returning Two Disciples on the Road from Emmaus) 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon (Peter)!' This is the night of Easter Sunday, so it would seem that Jesus appeared to Simon Peter sometime earlier that day, before the Two Disciples on the Road to Emmaus had returned that evening. Note also that it was "the eleven and their companions" who were gathered there. Judas had killed himself by that time, so the Twelve Apostles number

only eleven. Who their 'companions' were is not certain, but last week I suggested that Jesus' mother Mary and the other women were likely among that company, when (the two disciples who had been to Emmaus) told what had happened on the road, and how (Jesus) had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Lk. 24.33-35). Luke's gospel continues the story then, saying, "While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you,'" and thus this may be the appearance mentioned in Paul's list after Peter to the 'twelve,' forgetting that Judas was gone.

The appearance to Simon Peter in Paul's list, like that one to James, seems to have been an individual encounter, which may be why Peter is listed separately and by name in Paul's list. For Peter was also clearly there with the other disciples when the Resurrected Jesus appeared to them as a group on that every evening, the occasion when Thomas was not present with the others, and again a week later when Thomas was there, as well as in the Gospel story where Peter and eight other of the disciples encounter the Risen Jesus while fishing on the Sea of Tiberias (Jn. 21:1-14). "This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead," we are told there in the Gospel that is called John's (Jn. 21.14). Still nothing else about the individual appearance to Peter is reported; like the appearance to the five hundred or to James, only the fact of it is known.

But we know a lot about Peter. He is, in fact, one of the most prominent and colorful characters in the New Testament, conspicuous not only in the Gospels, but also in the Book of Acts, the two Epistles ascribed to him, and in much popular apocryphal writing in the second century. And Peter is best known for his burst of faith and devotion, usually following by doubt and inadequacies. For instance, think of the Gospel story today of Peter faithfully walking on the water and then beginning to doubt and then sinking. When Peter began to sink, Jesus reprimanded him saying, "O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Mt. 14.31) Or remember when Peter boldly confessed at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus was the Son of God, and then immediately thereafter as Jesus began for the first time to foretell of his coming arrest and torture, Peter impetuously rebuked Jesus, saying "God forbid it, Lord. This shall never happen to you." Jesus then turned and replied to Peter with the sharpest reprimand of all, "Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mt. 16.23).

Peter's failings and apparent inability to fully understand Jesus' ministry were most clearly evident in those last days of Jesus' life. At the Last Supper, for instance, Peter at first refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet with the other disciples in the Upper Room, "You will never wash my feet," Peter said boldly. And then Jesus insisted, saying, "Unless I wash you, you

have no share with me." And then Peter absurdly begged him to wash his head and his hands as well (Jn. 13.8). During the Last Supper, Jesus forewarned the disciples that one of them would betray him, then Peter swore his undying allegiance to Jesus, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death," whereupon Jesus revealed to Peter that he was going to deny him three times before the cock crows (Mt. 26.32). Then while Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter and John and James were with him, and they all fell asleep. When Jesus found them sleeping, he said, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? . . . the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mk. 14.37). Then when the mob arrived in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter was quick to pull out his sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the High Priest, to which Jesus again rebuked Peter saying, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who live by the sword, die by the sword" (Mt. 26.52).

And finally in the High Priest's courtyard, there Peter is best remembered for denying three times that he even knew Jesus. "I do not know him," he cried out, "And immediately, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord (himself) turned and looked at Peter (Lk. 22.61). And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And (Peter) went out and wept bitterly." Peter's Denial of Jesus is perhaps the best-known story about him, and is widely retold.

Yet we have no account of what occurred in that first Resurrection Appearance to Peter. But then, perhaps, we do not really need one. We know what occurred. The Risen Jesus appeared to Peter and he probably disbelieved the witness of his own eyes, whereupon Jesus rebuked him again for his disbelief. Then upon realizing that it was the Risen Jesus, Peter probably collapsed at Jesus' feet in tears. Whereupon Jesus reassured him that everything was okay, and that Peter's failures and shortcomings did not really matter, and that his sins were forgiven. No one who has ever carried a burden of sin and failure to God in confession, and received the reassurance of God's forgiveness, and who really felt forgiven, finds it hard to understand why Peter never told others the details of his first contact with the Risen Jesus. The meeting was too intimate to be revealed, too personal and too painful.

Although Peter never described his forgiveness, he must have spoken often of his sin. For the stories of Peter's shortcomings are found again and again in all four of the Gospels; and others would hardly have told these stories of him had he not led the way. Peter must have returned again and again to his own personal failings, and especially to that denial in the High Priest's courtyard, which had revealed to him the full extent of his weaknesses and shortcomings, a painful reality to face and to hold within. The Power of the Resurrection for Peter was surely

the power to forgive, to free one not only from the bonds of death, but of sin, with a new life.

We can almost hear Peter telling the story again and again, and perhaps ending it by saying, "That man, warming himself at the fire in the High Priest's courtyard, denying even knowing his Master --- that man is me. All the rest," his apostleship, his ministry, his years of faithful service, his martyrdom --- "all the rest is the redeeming work of God." The power of forgiveness is perhaps the most important message for us from the Resurrection appearance to Peter, and also the most intimate. The power of the Resurrection can be seen clearly in the transformed life of that failed disciple of Jesus into a powerful leader for the early church, later martyred on the Vatican hill in Rome.

AMEN.