

Sermon: “**God Shows No Partiality**”
Easter Sunday, Cycle A
Acts 10:34–43

Daniel M. Hooper
March 23, 2008
Hollywood Lutheran Church

+

It always amazes me how churches that were all black and dark and somber on Good Friday get transformed in a mere day to be joyous and light and golden and flower-filled. It’s totally amazing. Yesterday I saw the worker bees here dashing around to make this possible: replacing purple and black with white and gold; and filling this room with a virtual garden.

But it set me thinking about the first Easter Day—the *Day of Christ’s Resurrection*, when nobody seemed to have a clue what was coming, and after going into gloom and hiding, there was certainly no time to prepare for a joyous celebration. Only the women—God bless em’—were prepared, but for the wrong event. They had gone to get the burial spices and compounds, and came back to the tomb as soon as the Sabbath was past, before the first light of dawn, to finish the grim business of preparing the dead body of Jesus to rest in that tomb for eternity.

The men, meanwhile, were hardly prepared for Easter either. The Scripture tells us they were still locked up in some secretive room in the city, deeply buried in their own anguish at the horror of what had happened to their Lord, and probably more than a little ashamed that they had deserted him in his hour of need.

I began wondering what the events would have been like, on that first Easter morning, if this event had been properly “calendered” by God Almighty, so that human beings could be more prepared. You know, if God had sent out angels through the skies like in the Christmas story. If that had been the Easter story, the women, with the help of the Beloved Disciple, might have *decorated* the garden where the tomb was, and draped the big stone over the opening with garlands of flowers. The male disciples, at least, would have put on their best suits of clothing, and maybe polished their sandals!

And those Chief Priests and Pharisees—posturing and trying to put a “spin” on things, might have at least had time to call a press conference and make a public statement about the “unusual developments,” in Jesus’ resurrection, and perhaps said something like, “In spite of the past differences between us, it is our hope that we can work with Jesus of Nazareth in the weeks and months ahead! ... A high level meeting will be arranged in the next few days.” Unquote.

But no, nothing was really prepared in advance, at least among human beings. The power of God caught them *all* by surprise – the women with their spices, the disciples in hiding, the guards at the tomb, perhaps even Pontius Pilate, who had condemned Jesus to die, in his palace. And as the news spread that Easter day and the next, most certainly the great religious leaders who had thought they had turned the page on the whole messy thing about Jesus of Nazareth, were caught by surprise and disbelief.

Now, the Bible goes to great lengths here to tell us that what we are reading are *eyewitness accounts*. It repeats the story in such a way, almost as if written by a modern day newspaper reporter, to say who *saw* what and when; who *said* what, and *who told whom* what they *saw and heard*. If this had all unfolded *neatly* according to a pre-planned event, however, there would have been proper spokesmen, even among the disciples, with sound bytes and talking points ready for the cameras and the tape recorders.

And I suspect, most especially, among the Disciples. They would have quickly decided that St. Peter was in charge, and he would be the one who would speak for the group.

But that is not the way the first Easter Day unfolded, is it? The swagger of men is left out of this, because they were hiding, and it was the women who heard the angelic announcement. And it was *the women* who first meet the Living Christ, face to face, and fall down in awe and reverence and

fear at what they had seen. It was *the women* who were the eyewitnesses.

In the alternate Gospel reading appointed for this morning, from John 20, it does not mention women plural, but it says all the same thing happened first to one woman, known as Mary Magdalene. Not a prostitute or a woman caught in adultery, but a troubled woman who had been healed of her inner demons, and a woman of some considerable means who traveled with Jesus and the disciples and other women and partially financed his many teaching and healing missions around Galilee.

Christian history has not been kind to women in general or to Mary Magdalene in particular. It was a pope more than a thousand years ago who either mistakenly or intentionally spread the error that Mary was a prostitute. In our times, it was Dan Brown whose popular DaVinci Code novel spread the error that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' secret girlfriend or mistress. Maybe you enjoyed the book or the movie, but you should be aware that it was fiction—virtually 99% fiction that still puts Mary Magdalene, one of the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, in a secondary role.

Why am I making a “thing” about all this? I want to look briefly at our Reading from the book of Acts—the story of the earliest church in the months and years after Jesus rose. Weeks have passed, after that Easter Day, and St. Peter finally has his chance to make a coherent public statement. But instead of saying, “I’m in control here!”—like Alexander Haig famously did at the White House in 1981 after President Ronald Reagan had been shot—no, speaking with the Holy Spirit in his heart, St. Peter told an amazing bit of truth. “I truly understand that God shows no partiality,” he said. “In every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him.” And speaking of Jesus, Peter said, “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Now, please, ladies and gentlemen, *do not panic*. You heard this right, shocking though it is. It says right here (Acts 10:34) that “God shows no partiality.”

I know this sounds like a whole lot of trouble for us. For one, it means that the Lutherans are not at the head of the line, going to heaven! And neither are the Baptists. Or the Roman Catholics, or Jehovah’s Witnesses. So if you belong or have belonged to any of those exclusive clubs, Peter’s message to you today is, “Get over it. God shows no partiality.”

And Peter is right, even as he stirred the hornet’s nest. Are you sitting down, men? If God shows *no* partiality, men have no advantage over women in the realm where Jesus Christ is Lord. And this is why it is significant to say, “excuse me, but the first eyewitness to the fact that Jesus, who was dead and buried, was raised to life again by the power of God, was a woman.”

In the New Testament, we read about the Twelve Disciples until the time of the resurrection, which is the end of the four Gospel accounts. But from then on, we run into this word “apostle.” There are a lot of ways to define this term, and why it began being used. But when the Eleven gathered to select a replacement for Judas Iscariot, the traitor who had killed himself, their criteria were simple. In this same Book of Acts, it explains that they wanted to select someone to replace him who had accompanied Jesus from the very beginning of his story until the very end, who could serve as a witness to all the good news which had happened among them. They wanted an eyewitness.

I can’t help wondering if Mary Magdalene were standing on the sidelines that very day as the men conducted their business, and tried to say out loud: “Excuse me? What am I, chopped liver?” But the truth is God’s full impartiality has taken a long time to sink in. Even though St. Peter said the words here, he didn’t easily grasp the implication of what the Holy Spirit was telling him in his heart. God shows no partiality.

Now, stay with me, friends; *keep up*. If God shows no partiality, where did that leave the Chosen People, the Jewish people, the people with their elaborate system of religious laws and

commandments? St. Peter says, “In every nation any one who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him.” That means—and I am not exaggerating for effect—that the entire world of religious laws and systems and commandments does not give anybody “a leg up” with God. Why? Because God shows partiality to those who fear him—that is, respect him—and who do what is right. As for the Chosen People? As far as St. Peter is concerned, they were no longer any more chosen than Greeks or Italians, or for that matter Salvadoreños or Irish.

I said people are slow to grasp the implications of this. A few years back his Holiness Pope John Paul II categorically ruled out—again—the ordination of women to the Roman Catholic priesthood. And he did so, in his own words, for one of the flimsiest reasons I can imagine. He said it was because Jesus had only male disciples, not female. Your holiness, tell that to **Mary Magdalene**, the first eyewitness. Tell that to **Mary** the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who sat at the Lord’s feet as a student. Tell that to **Priscilla**, a married woman who with her husband traveled extensively with St. Paul on missionary journeys. Tell that to **Lydia**, who organized an entire congregation out of her own living room in a town in Macedonia. Tell that to **Junia**, whom St. Paul calls an apostle in his letter to the Romans, and in fact says she was *prominent* among the apostles. A couple of hundred years ago, Christian bible translators were so upset by this name Junia in the letter to the Romans that they just erased her and penciled in Junius—changed her gender so that there couldn’t have been any female apostle. Well, it didn’t work because modern scholars have tracked down every detail about their intentionally misleading sex change, and *changed it back*. And it didn’t work, really, because God shows no partiality to men, or to Jewish people, or to Lutherans, Baptists, Moravians or Swedenborgians.

In fact, every great social upheaval down through history has driven us back to the Good News which St. Peter gave voice to here: God’s love is available to everybody. God’s forgiveness is there for anyone, *anyone*, who puts their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Amen?

I am not choosing sides in the presidential race, but like many others I have found this week’s events interesting that Democratic candidate Barack Obama distanced himself from his own pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Jr. If God shows no partiality, are *Black* people eligible for the love and grace of God, Amen? If God shows no partiality, are *white* people also eligible for the love and grace of God? Are Korean people, Amen? Are gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender people? Are convicted felons? Are red necks or blue collar workers? Illegal aliens? This gets a little *difficult*, doesn’t it? Because *if God accepts all people*, how can *we* close our minds or harden our hearts to anybody else? Anybody else? We are all God’s children!! What part of all don’t we get?

Say, how far does this go, my friends? *How far* does the Good News apply? Is God the Ultimate Liberal, who opens his heart to every person created in God’s own image? Does God love *even people who don’t consider themselves religious*? Does God love people *who only go to church on Easter and Christmas*, or who drive like devils and swear like sailors? Or who have *piercings and tattoos*? Who drank and did drugs, and haven’t found their Higher Power yet? Does God’s love extend *even to them*? Does God’s forgiveness extend like a blanket over the *whole human race*?

The word “apostle” by the way, really means “those who are sent”—like ambassadors or envoys. So if the love and acceptance of God Almighty extends to everyone, then ours is not a system of “insiders” and “outsiders.” It is a *delivery system* for *Good News*: where the “insiders” go *out* and tell the story and spread the news. Like the women at the tomb, like Mary Magdalene, like the apostles, like those who are loved and freed and redeemed and whole again, *joyfully spreading the news about their own lives*. Go and tell it yourselves: Christ is risen. He is risen *indeed*. Alleluia!