

## SPG#166, EASTER 2A

March 30, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

Today in the Acts reading we encounter one of the most colorful and endearing figures in all of scripture, the Apostle Peter. Peter the fisherman. Peter, the one who saw Jesus walking on the water and joined him only to begin to sink when he had doubts. Peter, who denied that he had any connection with Jesus three times. In the New Testament Peter is shown to be impulsive but devoted to Jesus. Peter was the one who made the confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” As a person Peter is most often presented in the context of his relation to Jesus. His humanity seemed to be “out there.” In his relationship to Jesus he either looked praiseworthy or embarrassing. And so we see this very human Peter in the time before the crucifixion. Traditionally he was from the town of Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Archaeologists claim to have found the ruins of his house there beneath the ruins of a church that had been built on top of it. Jesus reportedly spent quite a bit of time in this house. He is supposed to have healed Peter’s mother in law who was sick with a fever there. It was in Peter’s house that some men broke open the roof to let down their sick friend in front of Jesus. The ruins of the first century synagogue are there where Jesus often discussed and debated scripture. So, it is easy to see a typical day in the life of Peter as involving time in his boat fishing, time in the synagogue( and I expect that he had a very active presence in the synagogue with more energy given to talking than listening), time in his home, and time with Jesus and other followers. The picture of the man Peter in the New Testament is very prominent.

But then, in a direct contrast to Peter the man before the resurrection, we get a good picture of him after the resurrection. Whereas Peter had been unpredictable before, now he was empowered. Where Peter had been at times foolish, now he appeared eloquent.

It is this post resurrection Peter that we see in today's Acts reading. When we take the life of Peter before the resurrection and his life afterwards we get the picture of a truly remarkable man, remarkable as a man, and remarkable in his being empowered to become an apostle. He is so remarkable that the Roman Church has designated him as their first Bishop of Rome, the first Pope.

For us his life is a study. As a man he was often right and sometimes wrong. More than once he seems to have engaged his mouth before thinking. He was known as a physically imposing figure. Yet, he is also seen as quite vulnerable.

By virtue of Peter's associations with Jesus before the resurrection and his experience with Jesus after the resurrection, somehow, this man was changed. And thus we hear this changed man uttering these words in Acts today. He is speaking to a large gathering of people including Jews just after the experience of Pentecost. He says,

“You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.”

And so it is before us to attempt to describe what happened to this man. A favorite word that is used when referring to Peter's experience of the Risen Lord is the word empowered. By virtue of Peter's encountering Jesus as risen he was empowered from the unpredictable disciple of Jesus to the eloquent and courageous Apostle Peter.

In my experience I have known people, lay and clergy, who I would have called empowered. As human beings most of them would have been considered unlikely figures to be doing the work they were doing in the Church. But as witnesses of the Risen Lord they seemed very well suited to do the work they were doing. In their empowerment they seemed to retain some of the human frailties that had always characterized them. But somehow those frailties were not a barrier to their service in the Church. I expect that Peter retained some of the characteristics that he is famous for before his experience of the Risen lord. Perhaps he was still impulsive. Perhaps he still had a tendency to talk before thinking. But apparently from what we know of his activity in the first century, none of that got in the way. None of that prevented him from doing the work of an apostle. By today's standards he might or might not be the person a diocese would want for Bishop. But the testimony of his empowered service cannot be denied. And that is what made him an apostle.

For us in our times any in depth look at Peter's life and ministry provokes one to think about how his life might apply to ours. Perhaps we would identify with his human frailties and shortcomings. Perhaps we would go so far as to hope to be empowered the way he was empowered.

Wherever our thinking goes on that I think we would all agree that the consideration of Peter's experiences is a consideration of a life in Christ. And a consideration of his life will invariably lead us to a consideration of our own life in Christ.

And that being the case we are presented with inevitable questions: What place does empowerment have in our lives as Christians? Could I or you, or any of us in our human frailties be a candidate for empowerment?

Peter's empowerment was based on his association with Jesus before and after the crucifixion and resurrection. But more specifically Peter had been a witness to Jesus' death and a witness to resurrection. The witnessing of those two events, Jesus' death and Jesus' resurrection, had the power to change Peter. And it is this witnessing that Peter speaks of in today's reading from Acts. Peter reviewed for the Jews the larger segments of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. He said, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power. You killed this man. But he was raised again. God freed him from death." Peter reviewed for the Jews the happenings of Jesus' life. But he was also talking about his relationship with Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection and what it had done to him.

I think it would be a mistake to assume that our empowering must be a duplicate of Peter's empowering. It would be a mistake to assume that we are empowered in the way he was or not at all.

History has shown that the people of the faith are empowered in different ways. And beyond that, empowering for some will be a dramatic transformation. For others it will be a quiet evolution. Further, most if not all our models for empowerment in the Church are male oriented models. As women who are clergy and lay leaders in our churches gain more recognition and more support, we should be able to benefit from more feminine oriented models. The important thing is that we gain a perspective on empowerment.

In our skeptical 21<sup>st</sup> century such things are minimized and sometimes dismissed.

But in the history of the Church congregations have moved forward under adversity because the members of the congregation were empowered.

It becomes a question of how much we are willing to be affected by Christ. How much do we let his life, death, and resurrection mean to us?

Peter's witnessing of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection changed him. The first century followers discovered to their amazement that even after he had ascended into heaven that they could still witness the reality of his life, the reality of his presence.

And so it is that over centuries many have claimed to witness his presence and thus his empowering. In various times and places these witnesses professed a change, an empowering. And when they did the Church took a step forward.

There is no problem in the Church that is not answered by her members being empowered in Christ. But empowering is not confined to rescuing a church. Being empowered in Christ can change lives. It can change the world.

Peter, full of human frailties, became an empowered witness. He is a role model for us.

May our lives be lives affected by Christ. May we be empowered toward the future.

Empowered to change. Empowered in service. Amen.

