

## “AN INCLUSIVE CLUB”

### Acts 10: 34-43

Several years ago, A Christian research and study group posed a series of questions to the public at random – One of the questions asked was: “What is Easter?” The answers ranged from, “Easter is Jesus’ birthday” to “Easter is the day Jesus died on the cross”....to “Easter is the celebration of the coming of Spring.” And increasingly, Easter, like Christmas, is celebrated by the general population as a “Cultural Holiday”, but not necessarily as a religious “Holy Day.” Many children and adults think of Easter as the day for “Chocolate Bunnies” and “Easter Egg hunts” – A time for new clothes – A time for classic movies to run on TV – A time for family get-togethers.....For far too many people, Easter has become a secular celebration with the religious and true meaning of the day lost to the world powers of commercialism....So today, for the next several minutes, I invite you to join me in reflecting on the importance of this day to our faith – And to the history and future of the world – Because, without the miracle of Easter, there would be no Christian faith – Without the miracle of the empty tomb, and the resurrection of our Lord – Jesus Christ of Nazareth would be just another prophet – Just another Rabbi – Just another “man of God”.....But not the God-Man! So, what is Easter? Easter is the foundation of our faith! Easter is the fulfillment of Christ’s promises! Easter is the most important day in all of human history! Easter is the witness of life defeating the power of death! Easter is our reason to hope and have faith in the promises of Christ! Easter is the celebration of life for all of the world! It’s an “Inclusive Club” – And mutual commitment is communicated – Easter is a relationship – A relationship between Christ, the one who died for all of us....and our shared responsibility as the children of God to live as people wholly devoted to Jesus – All of us, living for the glory of God! In our scripture lesson this morning from Acts 10, Peter – Yes, that disciple who denied Jesus three times on Maundy Thursday, is presenting the gospel message to Cornelius and a group of gentiles, who are eager to hear what Peter has to say. What was once considered an exclusive Jewish faith is opening up to all people – Peter’s message is the “Good News” of peace through our Lord Jesus Christ, Lord of all. Peace was God’s promise in the Old Testament, and it is now granted to all who’ll receive it – Peace is a synonym for salvation: Peace isn’t merely a lack of conflict or political stability.....But peace with God, our Creator – “Shalom”, the Hebrew word for peace means “Wholeness” – We are a broken-people, but the power of the resurrection can make us “Whole” – We encounter Christ in our suffering – Our war with God is over, if we want it to be....Peter presents a concise statement of the basic gospel message – He points out that Jesus’ life – His teachings – His miracles – and his resurrection – Confirms that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah. In verse 43, Peter declares that “All the prophets testify about him.” The “Messianic age” has arrived with its “Spiritual renewal”, and a “Forgiveness of sins through his name.” The kingdom of God came in a way that most people didn’t expect – Eternal life is within reach for those who believe! Jesus is a revolutionary, but just not the kind of religious leader people had anticipated. Jesus introduced a new world of comfort and hope – One of love and forgiveness – And this new world began when he came out of the tomb on Easter morning – And Jesus did not show favoritism – He accepts all people – men, women, and children from every nation, and if this is not a clear communication of “One for all”, then I don’t know what is? Jesus’ club is “An inclusive club” – Christ’s death and resurrection was not just for a few privileged Jews – It was for the redemption of the world! Everyone who believes – Everyone who does what is right – Everyone, regardless of race, age, gender, ethnicity – can be the heirs of Christ’s gift of redemption. But, we also need to understand “Why” Jesus died for us.....To remove the penalty of our sin! A popular Muslim author was being interviewed, and she readily admitted, “What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness! I have no one to forgive me...” We all need forgiveness, and Easter makes this possible! Easter is also a time when skeptics abound – They demand proof, yet at the same time, they reject the historical record of the New Testament – How do you know Jesus rose from the dead, they ask? By the testimony of reliable “Eye Witnesses” Jesus not only appeared to many people, he sat down and ate with them – The disciples believed in the resurrection of Christ, not because they couldn’t find his dead body, but because they had found a “Living Christ” – Walking, talking, and being physically present – According to the apostle Paul, over 500 people saw the risen-Lord, and they devoted their lives to this gospel message of hope.....The stone was rolled away, not to let Jesus out of the tomb, but to let the witnesses in the tomb. Why didn’t everyone see the risen Christ? Perhaps because of what Jesus told Thomas – “Blessed are those who believe without

seeing!” It takes the eye of faith to see – Believing is seeing – And admitting to the resurrection means that God is in charge! We must answer to God – God expects us to be God’s means of victory over evil – God’s instruments of righteousness, God’s answer to human suffering – We are all one in Christ Jesus, and we belong to Jesus, his heirs according to the promise – one Christ died for all.....one Christ, now and forever! One Christ who was – who is – and who will come again! Easter is the outpouring of God’s grace upon the world. Easter is the enactment of John 3: 16 – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” For God so loved the world – The whole world – Not just the Jews, not just those few who remained faithful to Christ at the time of his death – Not just the common people – Not just the temple leaders – Christ is “The One” for all of humanity! Christ died and rose for each of us here this morning – regardless of who we are, or what we’ve done – regardless of our individual sins – Christ’s victory through the cross is our victory – Christ’s resurrection on that first Easter morning is our sure and certain hope – That on the day of Christ’s return, we will also be resurrected with him.....and yet, the debate continues.....”Who’s in?” and “Who’s out?”.....And perhaps we all need a conversion like Peter’s – A conversion that can motivate us into a ministry of unity to bring Christ’s gospel message to our world. Easter is the day to lay aside our differences of worship – Styles and theologies, and band together as the family of God....with God’s message to the world. This message of the empty tomb is so powerful, that we must proclaim it – We must share this good news to all people, regardless of their sins – they can come and find the grace of Christ – For this is what Easter is all about – God’s grace for all people – “He is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” And we must remember, that very first Easter was not in a crowded worship space with singing and praising – On that very first Easter, the disciples were locked in their homes – It was dangerous for them to come out! They were afraid! They wanted to believe the good news they had heard from the women at the tomb, that Jesus had risen, but it seemed too good to be true.....They were living in a time of such despair and fear! If they left their homes, their lives, and the lives of their loved-ones might be at risk! Could a miracle really have happened? Could life really had won-out over death? Could their time of terror and fear really be coming to an end? Alone in their homes, they dared believe that this hope was possible, that the long night was finally over and a glorious morning had broken....That God’s love was the most powerful force of all, even though it didn’t seem quite real yet. Eventually, they were able to leave their homes – When the fear and danger had subsided – They went around celebrating and spreading the good news that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead and his love was the most powerful force on earth.....And this year – the year of the COVID 19 virus – We might just get to experience a taste of what that first Easter was all about – Here we are....still in our homes, daring to believe that hope is on the horizon. Then, after a while, when it is safe for all people – When it is the most loving choice – We will come out of our homes and gather together again – To sing and shout the good news that God brings life even after death – That love always has the final say.....This year, we might get the closest taste we have ever had to what that very first Easter was really like – Do you have enough joy in the message you have to share about Jesus Christ? That we can overcome the fear of sharing this good news? Are you so filled with the joy of the resurrection, that you can lay aside selfish ambitions and unite with the family of God to proclaim to the world the joy of Jesus’ resurrection? Sharing this joy can be a scary idea – Just as Christ’s ministry to the outcasts and the downtrodden can be a scary idea.....But the truth remains – Christ was born as the hope for humanity – Christ lived as a human being knowing the hurts and joys, and the pains and sorrows of a man....Jesus stretched out his arms and died on the cross, carrying with him the sins of all humanity.....and this day – this Easter morning – Christ rose, conquering the power of death – That all of humanity may live and have eternal life! Let us share this glorious message of hope! “He is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” Amen!