

*Luke 22:54-62 (NRSV)*

<sup>54</sup>Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. <sup>55</sup>When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. <sup>56</sup>Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." <sup>57</sup>But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." <sup>58</sup>A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" <sup>59</sup>Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." <sup>60</sup>But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. <sup>61</sup>The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." <sup>62</sup>And he went out and wept bitterly.

*Acts 2:22-24, 29-30, 32-33, 36-42 (NRSV)*

[About six weeks after denying Jesus three times, Peter and the disciples are empowered by the Holy Spirit who arrives on the Day of Pentecost. Peter rises to address the crowd.]

<sup>22</sup>"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— <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

<sup>29</sup>"Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. <sup>30</sup>Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne.

<sup>32</sup>This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. <sup>33</sup>Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. . . .

<sup>36</sup>Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

<sup>37</sup>Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" <sup>38</sup>Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup>For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." <sup>40</sup>And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." <sup>41</sup>So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. <sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

*Today, we begin a new sermon series on great comebacks. As we'll see, the Bible's comeback stories are not always quite what they seem. Our first story is Peter's: from terrified disciple to courageous preacher.*

What must Peter have thought when he looked back on that terrible night when Jesus had been arrested and hauled before Caiaphas, the high priest. During their last meal together, Jesus had foreseen Peter's weakness, his cut and run attitude when things would get their toughest. Peter, in his unthinking enthusiasm, had told Jesus that he was ready to go with him to prison and even death . . . but Jesus knew better. He told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed at sunrise.

In the garden, Peter had slept while his Lord prayed in anguish over the ordeal that lay ahead. When the priests and soldiers arrived, Peter had stood on the outside, withdrawing from the crowd, distancing himself from the unfolding tragedy. As Jesus was led away, Peter had kept his distance, an observer only, neither a participant nor a defender.

And then, to his great everlasting shame, Peter had denied Jesus three times in quick succession. Each time, someone had said that they recognized Peter as one of those who had been following Jesus. Each time, Peter quickly and vehemently denied it. And he had

wept bitterly over his weakness and his shame. Great rivers of tears had flowed in those early morning hours. But they hadn't helped. He had just walked away and stayed away until the women had come to find him on Sunday morning with their astonishing story of angels and an empty tomb.<sup>1</sup>

Now, despite Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Peter's guilt and shame remained with him. In Jerusalem, he sat with the other believers waiting for . . . well, he wasn't sure, but Jesus had promised that there was yet more to come.

Suddenly, God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, was present with them, empowering and strengthening them all. Peter felt himself moved and when some of the gathered crowd began to accuse the believers of drunkenness, he rose to speak. The world would never be the same.<sup>2</sup>

*Where did that come from?*

Surely, many in the crowd drawn by the commotion that Pentecost morning knew all about Jesus, his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. And they had undoubtedly heard the claims and rumors about Jesus' having been resurrected. How could they not have heard? Two decades later, Paul would claim that 500 people had seen Jesus post-resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15). And, at least some in the crowd would have known that Peter was a fisherman from Galilee, one of those rustic rural types, perhaps illiterate and uneducated. And it is even possible that some had heard stories of Peter's denial of Jesus. It is doubtful that the three people who confronted Peter would have kept those stories to themselves. It wasn't every day that a self-professed Messiah was put on trial by Caiaphas and Pilate.

So, it isn't hard to imagine the shock and awe on the faces in the crowd, as Peter rose to speak. This fisherman was telling them that the believers were certainly not drunk. Rather, the long-awaited Day of the Lord had arrived, as promised by God through Joel and the prophets. And not only did Peter make the seemingly silly claim that the Day of the Lord had arrived,<sup>3</sup> he proceeded to claim that his fellow Jews had killed God's Messiah: "this man . . . you crucified and killed . . . Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

I wonder which part of Peter's sermon drew the strongest reaction from the crowd. His claim that Jesus, who had been humiliatingly crucified, was Messiah and had been resurrected by God, or his charge that Jesus' blood was on the crowd's hands. The onlookers had to be standing there in slack-jawed amazement. They had never witnessed anything like it in all their lives. Surely they asked themselves, "Where did *that* come from?" They would soon learn.

Wide-eyed wonderment was not the end of the story. Peter spoke the truth to that crowd and the truth cut right into their hearts. God, again in the person of the Holy Spirit, spoke to them through Peter and the crowd knew the truth of Peter's words. God had moved with great power that morning among the believers. Now, God was moving with the same power among the crowd. They *knew* their mistake; they *knew* their guilt. And they wanted to know what to do next.

Peter's answer to them ought to surprise you a bit. He doesn't tell them, "Love Jesus," nor does he say "Let Jesus into your heart." Rather, he tells them to repent and be baptized; i.e., turn your life around, embrace Jesus' way, and enter the fellowship of believers. This was the path to the forgiveness that the crowd sought. And thousands did just that.

*How does one account for a comeback such as Peter's? In six weeks, he goes from a frightened denier of Jesus to a courageous man willing to risk death by telling the crowds the truth. We know that the explanation lies with God. That the power of God's Spirit strengthened and emboldened Peter and also moved thousands of onlookers to genuine repentance. The same God, by the same Spirit, moves among us, dwelling within each of us, empowering us to do God's work – to invite, to worship, to learn, to pray, to care, to give, to serve.*

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<sup>1</sup>In Luke's account, Peter disappears from the narrative after his three-time denial of Jesus. He is not mentioned in any of Friday's events and doesn't reappear in the narrative until Sunday.

<sup>2</sup>For more on the story of Pentecost, see last week's study, "The Spirit of Pentecost." All 300+ studies are posted as pdf files at [www.thebibleacademy.com](http://www.thebibleacademy.com).

<sup>3</sup>For the Jews of Jesus day, the Day of the Lord was to be the BIG day, when God put the world right, raised all the dead, showed the world that the Jews had been right all along, and ushered in his kingdom to be ruled by God's Messiah. But on that Pentecost morning, the world looked nothing like that. It was just another Festival day in a long line of such days.

## William Willimon on Peter's Speech-making

In his *Interpretation* series commentary on Acts, William Willimon offers us the following reflections on Peter's speech and the many other speeches in Luke's account:

One reason why most of us enjoy reading the Gospels is that we all enjoy good stories. In this commentary we have stressed the power of narrative to unlock our imagination and restructure our world view. But speeches, particularly sermons, are another matter. The conventional three-points-and-a-poem sermon is no one's definition of fun. Acts has some twenty-eight speeches, mostly by Peter and Paul, that account for nearly a third of the entire text. The interpreter of Acts must overcome a built-in bias against so much sermonizing. Why did Luke put so much of Acts in the form of speeches?

The crowd's accusation of drunkenness serves as a cue for Peter to make a speech. Here is a pattern we will see repeated in Acts. The church is confronted by a crowd, some of whom understand and some of whom do not. An apostle speaks, interpreting the gospel through a sermon. Luke's pattern was a favorite of classical historians. Through speeches, put upon the lips of distinguished historical figures, the ancient historian interpreted the meaning of events. At first this may seem a rather unimaginative, prosaic literary convention until we remember how, in our own day, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address did more than open a cemetery—it gave meaning and substance to a national cataclysm. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech reinterpreted our history and constituted and mobilized a people into action for justice. A good speech can turn us inside out.

Furthermore, a good speech has an identifiable and memorable form. Good speakers develop a distinctive style and a particular way of dealing with their material. Even though not all speeches in Acts follow the same outline, C.H. Dodd identified a definite pattern in Acts for their presentation in apostolic *kerygma*:

1. The age of fulfillment, or the coming of the kingdom of God, is at hand (vv. 16–21).
2. This coming has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus (vv. 22–23).
3. By virtue of the resurrection, Jesus is exalted at the right hand of God as the messianic head of the new Israel (vv. 24–36).
4. The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory (v. 33).
5. The messianic age will shortly reach its consummation in the second coming of Christ.
6. Forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation come with repentance (vv. 38–39 [p. 11]).

Dodd says, "We may take it that this is what the author of Acts meant by 'preaching the kingdom of God'" (p. 24). Here is the core of apostolic preaching as portrayed in Acts. But who is the audience for this preaching? Unbelievers in the street? In our earlier discussion of the purpose of Acts, we asserted that Acts was probably written for "insiders"—Christians who were struggling to retain the boldness, faith, and confidence in the face of new internal and/or external struggles. The Luke-Theophilus dialogue was part of a long conversation between God and the people of God. Luke is the moderator between Theophilus' church and the panel of eyewitnesses of the Christ-event. It is the church's own skepticism, doubt, and despair which is the audience for Peter's speech.

Any good speech is more than *what* was said, and *to whom* it was said; it is also a matter of *how* it is said. First, Peter bluntly counters the mockers' assertion of drunkenness (vv. 14–15). Crowds had earlier made the same charge of drunkenness against Jesus himself: "Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Luke 7:34). The church sees plainly that these events, experienced by the crowd as only disruptive inebriation and scandalous irrationality, are fulfillment of prophecy (vv. 14–21). Joel said that in the terrible and wonderful last days there would be an outpouring of the Spirit on everyone (Joel 2:28–32). The Spirit, once the exotic possession of a prophetic few, is now offered to all. The crowd, which also knows the Scriptures, do not see what the Scriptures so clearly prove.

## READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAY 18 – MAY 24

Some of Luke's stories about Peter.

**Monday**, Luke 5:1-11 Jesus calls Peter to follow him.

**Tuesday**, Luke 9:18-20 Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah of God

**Wednesday**, Luke 9:28-36 Peter at Jesus' transfiguration

**Thursday**, Acts 4:1-22 The arrest and release of Peter and John

**Friday**, Acts 9:36-43 Peter prays over a dead believer and she is brought back to life.

**Saturday**, Acts 10 Peter goes to see Cornelius, who comes to faith. He is the first gentile in the body of Christ.

## Sermon Notes

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### ***Get the Monkey Off Your Back: Making Sense of Creation and Evolution***

#### **The current *Something Else* series on Sunday mornings**

The debate around issues of creation and evolution isn't going away. Instead, it seems to get more and more heated, with a lot more talk than understanding. In this series, we'll try to make sense of the debate and see that Christian truth claims are not at odds with scientific claims.

**Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning.**

Today: Four Christian Approaches    Next Week: Faith, Science and Philosophy

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. In the coming weeks, we'll be talking about biblical comeback stories. We'll see that "comebacks" come in all shapes and sizes. You might take some time today and talk about comeback stories from your own life or the lives of people that you've known. What did these comebacks have in common? How would we explain them? How often did you or others see God at work in these comebacks? What was learned from the comeback? How do you think that Peter would have told his own comeback story? Do you think he would have described it as a comeback?
2. Luke tells us that 3,000 people repented and came to faith in Christ after Peter spoke. How do you really account for that? The Holy Spirit didn't simply wave a magic wand; God doesn't work that way. Try to put yourself in the crowd that day. How do you think Peter's sermon would have affected you? What about it might have enabled a person to repent and see that Jesus had truly been the Messiah? In other words, could Peter's words lead so many in the crowd to repent? Could words move you to repent?
3. Paul wrote that it was Christ who spoke through him. Do you think that Christ spoke through Peter that day during Pentecost? Do you think that Christ speaks through preachers today? You might share some experiences when the spoken word had a deep effect on you? What do you think led to such occasions? Are they common in your life or rare? How do you think you could help to make such experiences more a part of your regular worship experience? The preacher will preach, but what is your part? What is God's part?