**[1]** Sixth Sunday after Easter, May 25, 2025 (Memorial Day Sunday)
Sermon Title: Preaching Peace to the Italian Cohort
Scripture: Acts 10:34-48
Theme: This is one of the first of Peter’s Resurrection Sermons given in Caesarea before members of the Italian Cohort.

**[2]** In Spring 2017, the Vatican announced a new display at the Vatican Museum which included an ancient Pallium, a cloak made of wool, that belonged to Caesarius of Arles, dating from about 470 of the Common Era, and alongside it a monogram that contains a picture of the soldiers who guarded the tomb of Christ.  One of the earliest symbols of the church, alongside the chrismon and the fish, this monogram represents the fact that the soldiers guarding a sealed, yet empty, tomb had no clue as to what had happened to them on that early Easter morning.  This symbol highlights how differently the Gospel of Matthew remembers the resurrection story. The unique
part of Matthew’s account of the resurrection is the inclusion of soldiers guarding the tomb early Easter morning. In some ways, you might say that Matthew’s gospel presents the resurrection from a military point of view. How might we imagine the conversation that first Easter morning?
Perhaps in this way …

**[3]** They could not explain the earth quaking, and the tombs opening, nor could they explain why the body of Jesus was missing. What would they ever tell their superiors about this?  Well, you know the story, the chief priests gave each of them a large sum of money and together they invented the first “true lie,” the first counter-narrative, ‘the disciples stole his body.’  But, we know the rest of the story, don’t we?  An angel, in all white, and with lightning speed, broke the seal and rolled back the stone and sat on it.  Go in and look for yourselves, he said.  The body you laid in the tomb is not here. Jesus has been raised from the dead; Come and see the place where he lay!  Touch it, examine it, walk around it. Lay your hands on it! Look at the seal that the angel just broke in the flash of an instant. A Clean break on the seal! No signs of tampering.
How does an earthquake or strong wind NOT tear the seal rather than break it? But, these are clean breaks, sliced through like butter.

This was the real truth is that nobody wanted to speak out loud, the real narrative. The soldiers wanted something, anything, more believable, but how could they admit they were sleeping while on duty?  Can you imagine the question from the military superiors: ‘And, soldier, where were you when all this happened?’ Why weren’t you at your assigned post? Surely, you saw something. If you were asleep, why didn’t the noise alone wake you? And perhaps, after examining the seals and stone, the superiors might have done some last minute planning to keep
this quiet. “Here, take this money and conveniently disappear.  We will do the rest.”

**[4]** Maybe, they would not have to answer this question and people would believe the counter-narrative without any questions. Have you ever seen this before? Explaining the unexplainable.  Hiding the implications.  It’s a plausible narrative; it’s my story and I sticking to it.  I can imagine Jack Nicholson saying: “you can’t handle the truth.’  Can we, you and I, can we handle the truth?  ‘What is truth?’ anyway, says Pontius Pilate.  Is it just an agreed upon narrative?  Or is it more?  Did Peter need words when he stared into the truth conveyed in the eyes of Jesus whom he had just denied knowing?  There is a lot of truth in silence, is there not?
 A silent Jesus before Pilate?  A silent truth that no one can hear. A simple question carries a ton **[5]** of weight in its implications: ‘where’s the body?’ In Matthew’s account of the resurrection, all the followers are told to meet him on a mountaintop in Galilee. You might even have to divide up before meeting again. In other words, get out of Jerusalem!  Put on your traveling shoes! Get as far away from the authorities as you can. I have a secret mission for you; I will tell you more when we meet on the mountaintop. Hush, hush, for now! Don’t let them follow you.

I imagine there may have been some soldierly pushback on the cover-up of the missing body.
Perhaps, some of the disciples wanted to stay in Jerusalem and look for the missing body. Still,
the women were persistent—he said to leave Jerusalem and go to Galilee!

“We have better things to do than look for a missing body!  Did not the angel tell us:  ‘he is not here!’  We have a mission to the world.  Go and make disciples of people in all the nations and baptize them and teach them to obey all that I have commended you. I will be with you always to the ends of the earth and the end of all time. But, wait a minute! We need to investigate what happened and who is responsible, don’t we! Doesn’t this matter??

**[6]** ‘Where’s the body of Christ?’ You already know without hearing the words.  You are the body!  You are the hands.  You are the feet.  You are the lips. You are the eyes and ears.  ‘I will be with you always, always.’  Always means always.  Did you read the fine print on the gospel message: ‘He is not here!’  He is alive.  He lives.  You will see him at the mountaintop in Galilee.  You will see him on the shore at the lake offering breakfast.  You will see him in the upper room, eating and drinking with his disciples. You will see him walking to Emmaus, explaining the scriptures.  You will see him in the breaking of the bread and in the drinking of the wine. You will see him speaking through Stephen, ‘do not hold this sin against them, they know not what they do.’  You will see him beside the road to Damascus with Paul, or along the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza, with Philip, baptizing an Ethiopian Eunuch.  You will see him at the front and in the rear, opening Paul’s jail cell or breaking Peter’s chains.  Always means always!

We read this morning from one of Peter’s early sermons; perhaps we might call it one of his Easter sermons, falling in status somewhere after his Pentecost sermon in Jerusalem and his Beautiful Gate sermon in the Temple. It was given at a time when the newly formed churches were increasing in numbers of people attending gatherings throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, but perhaps more importantly, it was preached to a group of people who were mostly Gentile, dare I say mostly Italian.

**[7]** The Italian Cohort to which Cornelius belonged was formed specifically out of Roman troops who had been mustered into service in Italy known for their archery skills.  They were the ancient equivalent of the Navy Seals, specially trained and deployed, to make a difference in the critical moment of crisis. We are not sure whether Cornelius is retired from his service and simply living alone in Ceasarea, or with a small number of his former cohort living close to him.  But if the Italian Cohort is stationed in Ceasarea, then there would have been possibly anywhere from 600 to 1000 men, including what are called auxiliaries, living near Cornelius. (A *speira* is one-tenth of a legion; but Cornelius would have only commanded about 60 to 100 of those in the cohort.)   Acts tells us that Cornelius was a very devout man; he must have been one of those specially chosen for his leadership skills, what we might call a battalion officer, a man who was not in any sense a daredevil, but a man with a steady and sedate spirit.  He was punctual and on-time when he prayed, and most likely in everything that he did. But, there is a different side to Cornelius, a spiritual side that lives underneath his military side; perhaps, we might call it a moral side that lives deep inside of him. Perhaps, it is a deep yearning for peace, for intentionally converting swords into plowshares, transforming narratives of perpetual war into stories of perpetual peace.

He was generous to all those around him.  He was so unlike the soldiers guarding the tomb, those bribed to look the other way.  Cornelius upheld truth, even if it was inconvenient truth; he did not put his career before his love for his fellow soldiers at whatever level.  So, if we think about who might have been in the audience to hear Peter’s Easter sermon, it could have been any of the people touched by his leadership or his prayers or his charity, anyone in his considerable household. This audience had the potential of being very large.  Can you picture Cornelius explaining why they are here? “Men, I want you to be silent and listen carefully! Your life may depend on it!” Cornelius introduces Peter and then sits down to hear the message.

**[8]** Now, do you think Peter is going to give the same sermon he has been giving to Jewish audiences?  No, I do not think so.  This is his first sermon to Gentiles, to Italians no less. Peter
begins with some trepidation, no doubt. This audience is NOT going to hear me in the same way that others hear me. “I may only have one chance to reach them, he might have said. Lord, help me speak! So, Peter begins: “Gentlemen, I can see you are men of integrity and honor, just as is Cornelius, your commander!” And then Peter shifts over to his welcoming side: “In every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God; God is Lord of all people.” It is the very first point he makes.  The message God sends through his Son, Jesus Christ, is a message of peace and not war. We preach a message of hope and healing, a message of doing good things for the people we meet and others we may never meet. You may trust us to listen and to understand your injuries both spiritual and physical. We too need healing from moral injury, just as you do. Even though we have not been in the thick of the battle, we too feel the pain of betrayal and guilt. We want to listen to your stories closely and share a path of reconciliation. And, we want to know if you can tell us what a lasting peace looks like to you!
We want to know if you can embrace such a peace today.

We are witnesses to Judea, Galilee, and beyond that the God of the universe, reached out to earth, and came among us to share our condition. He handed over his Son Jesus only to see him cruelly crucified on a cross, but God also raised him on the third day afterwards, as the Christ, the longed-for Messiah, to reconcile people, internally and externally, to each other and to God.  He lives today that we too might live, and that you also might live.  We who ate and drank with him after he arose from the dead have been chosen to be witnesses and to carry this message, that whoever believes in Jesus the Christ receives forgiveness of sins and the joy of a peace that never dies.

**[9]** Acts tells us that the Holy Spirit fell on everyone who heard the word that day, all the soldiers, commanders and privates alike, Gentiles, Greeks, outcasts of all measures and types, and they were baptized in the name of Jesus.  Now, does anyone doubt that this is what an Easter sermon should do and should be?  The words on the catacomb walls written with the blood of the martyrs, “Life to You!”  They were not the words of Nero: “death to you,” but the words of Jesus: “Life to You.” Those who know Jesus know the words:

“Forgive your neighbor, your brother, your sister, as I have forgiven you!”

Do we really have to answer the question of truth today?  No, we do not. Who will hear our Easter sermon today?  What happened to the body?  Where did he send us?  What did he teach us?  How do we make disciples out of complete strangers, anyway?  Can I get an amen for the gospel today?  Can I get an amen from the Body?   Anyone out there? Eyes, arms, mouth, ears, legs, heart? Say with me now.  He is Risen, He is Risen Indeed! “

Alleluia! Amen.