# He went about doing good

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship  
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Acts 10:34-43

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

## Introduction

Vanity Fair just asked Sam Roberts, who writes obituaries for *The New York Times*, to write an obituary for Jesus as if they were writing just after his death. The obituary begins[[1]](#footnote-1):

Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean carpenter turned itinerant minister whose appeals to piety and whose repute as a healer had galvanized a growing contingent of believers, died on Friday after being crucified that morning just outside Jerusalem, only days after his followers had welcomed him triumphantly to the city as “the anointed one” and “the Son of David.” He was about 33.

It goes on to describe his relative obscurity prior to age 30, a bit about his family (noting that “questions had been raised about his paternity”), his attraction to the message of “an ascetic preacher named John,” his message and followers, and his arrest and death sentence by Governor Pontius Pilate. It ends:

After he was declared dead on Friday night, he was buried nearby in a cave. On Sunday, his disciples reported that the body was missing.

All in all, it’s not an unfair description. It’s definitely in that *New York Times* style: flat, impartial, “just the facts.” One more obituary of a celebrity among thousands we have read. One can imagine moving on to read about Gary Shandling the comedian; or Earl Hamner Jr., the t.v. writer who created “The Waltons;” or Joe Garagiola, the baseball player; Rita Gam, the actress; or Rob Ford, the drug-taking former mayor of Toronto, all of whom have died in the last week or so.

We get another obituary of Jesus presented in the very words of one of his followers, Peter, in our reading from the book of Acts. Let me remind you of the context: a Roman centurion, named Cornelius, had come to Peter with a remarkable story. Well, he didn’t come by himself, because he was not a Jew, and so he knew that Peter, as a Jew, would probably not receive him. Instead, he sent some of his Jewish friends on his behalf. They told the remarkable story: Cornelius said that a “holy angel” had appeared to him and told him to come to Peter and hear what Peter had to say.

And I suppose that Peter would have had a reason to be suspicious that Cornelius was a bit “off,” except that Peter himself had been having visions. Three times, Peter saw a tarp full of animals lowered down from heaven – animals forbidden him by the Jewish dietary laws. Despite that Torah commandment, he had heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter: kill, and eat.” Peter said he couldn’t, but the voice said: “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.”

Peter was confused by that vision — wouldn’t you be? But when Cornelius’s crowd showed up, he began to have an inkling of what it all meant. He agreed to go to Cornelius’s home in Ceasarea. He knew now that the vision didn’t mean so much that no food was unclean — but that no *person* was unclean.

Cornelius reported the angel told him to ask for Peter at the house of Simon the tanner, and when he came, Cornelius said to Peter, “We are now in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.”

And then Peter gives his obituary, his eulogy, his proclamation:

36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Peter’s speech as some surface similarities to Sam Roberts’s obituary. They both cover some of the bare facts of Jesus’s life: Jesus was centered in the Jewish homeland, he came into prominence in the aftermath of John’s preaching, that he “went about doing good and healing,” but was put to death.

But, of course, there are some remarkable differences. Let me note three of them.

Firstly, Peter is not a disinterested bystander. He not only witnessed “all that he did in Judea and Jerusalem” but was one of his close followers. He could see, what perhaps a *New York Times* reporter could not see (or at least report) what was the story behind the story. Jesus was not just a teacher and healer. Jesus was God-anointed, Jesus was full of Holy Spirit, Jesus was full of spiritual power. His teachings and healings were not merely done out of the goodness of his heart. His teaching and healings were in direct confrontation with the demonic powers who were oppressing the people with their false understandings and disease. He was up against the very Devil.

Secondly, Peter could infer something that a bare reading of the biography of Jesus would miss. Jesus was the culmination of something. Here’s how Peter’s speech puts it: “All the prophets testify about him.” He’s not just another rabbi: he is *the* teacher. He’s not just another prophet; he is *the* prophet. He is not just another leader; he is the Lord. He is not just another lord; he is *Lord of all*. He is not just another wise person, is the one sent *to judge the living and the dead*.

Why could Peter make such a claim? He was in Jesus’s inner circle and so he could see the clash between God and Devil taking place. Peter saw the oppression of his people, and Jesus healing them. Peter saw how people misunderstood and misappropriated the words of God, and how, ever more clearly, Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life. Peter saw the dove descending on Jesus at his baptism, and the words from heaven declaring Jesus God’s own son. Peter saw Jesus transfigured and speaking with Moses and Elijah. Peter saw Jesus walking on water, feeding thousands with nothing. Peter heard Jesus declare how blessed they were to to see what they saw – what kings and prophets of old had hoped to see.

But, of course the main reason: the main reason was that Jesus, though horrendously put to death, appeared to Peter and his fellow disciples after his death. And not in some spooky and ethereal way (well, maybe it was a little spooky) but in the flesh, a body that could eat and drink with them. “The Lord is risen, He is risen indeed!”

Thirdly, the life and resurrection had a profound effect and call on Peter’s life – and ours. When a star or celebrity or famous person dies, I think our major reaction is simply to miss them, to feel nostalgia in their absence. Take Joe Garagiola, one of the people I mentioned who died this week. He played baseball, but I knew as a sports broadcaster. Unless you care about baseball, his death probably didn’t affect you very much. Garagiola was mostly famous when I played baseball and followed it more than I do now. So, I remember this uncle-like figure, and thinking of him makes me nostalgic for my younger days.

But how different it was for Peter! In many ways, Jesus’s death was just the *beginning* of Peter’s relationship with Jesus. We remember, of course, that Peter betrayed Jesus at the end, but that the resurrected Jesus turns to Peter in a special way to recall him to himself. Jesus called Peter to himself when he was alive, and calls Peter to himself again, when Jesus is alive again.

Jesus remains connected to Peter: Peter is commanded. He is to preach, and preach, and preach. At this moment – one of the most momentous moments in the history of the world, actually – he is to preach *across the Jewish-Gentile* divide. “Everyone,” says Peter, “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins.” And “everyone” means anyone – Jew, Gentile, Greek, man, woman, black, white, gay, straight, old, young. If the peak of history was the coming of Jesus, his life and resurrection, now is the moment that the great spreading of good news begins: good news for everyone.

Hop by hop, that good news has spread around the world. And it has a call on *our* lives, too. We, too, can believe in Jesus and “received forgiveness of sins through his name.” And we who have believed that good news have the same call on our lives to share this same good news.

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

We, too, are called to remain followers of Jesus, engaging in the work of God, and engaged in the struggle against “the powers.”

We, too, are called to recognize the risen Lord and *delight* in worship.

We, too, are called to share this good news with others.

As we enter these first days of the Easter season, let me ask you to think of these things. What new thing might God be calling you to? What renewed energy might you bring to God’s work?

1. Roberts, Sam, “Jesus of Nazareth, Whose Messianic Message Captivated Thousands, Dies at About 33,” *Vanity Fair*. http://web.archive.org/web/20160326194744/http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/03/jesus-new-york-times-obituary [↑](#footnote-ref-1)