

Peter, the risen Lord and the early Church

Pope Benedict XVI will visit Washington and New York shortly after Easter. The timing of this papal visit raises the question: Is the ministry of the pope affected or even shaped in a particular way by the resurrection of the crucified Jesus? Is preaching the risen Lord at the heart of what St Peter and his successors do for the Church?

We might be inclined to say no, when we recall the famous and matching passages from *Matthew* 16 and *John* 21. In the first, Jesus promises Peter: “Thou are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church; and I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”

In the second passage, the risen Jesus makes good on his promise and commissions Peter: “Feed my lambs and feed my sheep.” These two texts are regularly cited by those who explain the Petrine ministry. They are written up for all to read inside the Basilica of St Peter’s in Rome. A promise made during the ministry of Jesus and its fulfillment after the resurrection have decisively shaped and supported the belief that Catholics and some other Christians hold about the role of Peter.

Yet St Paul writing around 55 A.D. and St Luke writing perhaps two decades later alert us to something else that might fill out our picture of what Peter and his successor do for the whole Church and the world. In *1 Corinthians*, Paul struggles to meet various problems that have arisen in the church of Corinth. One concerns the reality of Jesus’ glorious resurrection from the dead and its implications for Christian faith and life. The apostle challenges doubts and misconceptions by reminding the Corinthian Christians of a very early piece of preaching that he had handed on to them: ‘Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; he was buried; he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures; he appeared to Cephas [Peter] and then to the Twelve’ (*1 Corinthians* 15:3-5).

In his list of witnesses to the resurrection, Paul and the tradition that he quotes put Peter in first place. St Luke confirms this in a similar formulation that he derives

from early Christian sources and introduces at the end the Emmaus story: “The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon [Peter]” (*Luke* 24:34). Seemingly Luke inserts this item to head off any impression that the Emmaus appearance is the primary one. Even before Cleopas and his companion return, Peter’s testimony has brought to Easter faith “the Eleven” and “those who were with them” (*Luke* 24:33). The report from Emmaus and the later appearances of the Lord strengthen this faith, but do not evoke it for the first time.

In the first half of the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke will follow this up by telling his readers what Peter said and did as the primary witness to the resurrection. Right from the day of the first Pentecost, Peter acts as the head of a college of Easter witnesses by announcing the good news: “This Jesus you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God has raised him up and of that all of us are witnesses” (*Acts* 2:23-24, 32).

Along with the Twelve and other authoritative figures in the emerging Church, Peter is empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news to the world and to feed Christ’s “lambs and sheep” by teaching, leading and sanctifying them. This threefold ministry finds its central focus through preaching the resurrection of the crucified Jesus.

Beyond question, Peter may not have been chronologically the first disciple to see the risen Jesus. St John reports that near his open and empty tomb, the Lord first appeared to St. Mary Magdalene alone (*John* 20:11- 18). St. Matthew is in basic agreement but adds a second figure: he pictures Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (*Matthew* 28:1, 9-10). Beato Angelico, Titian and other great artists have made the scene of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene familiar around the world. We are faced with two ancient traditions: that Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene (*Matthew* and *John*) or that Jesus first appeared to Peter (Paul in *1 Corinthians*, and *Luke*).

The appearance to Mary Magdalene led early Christian writers to call her “the apostle to the apostles” and “another Eve who announced not death but life to the men.” As those who first discovered Jesus’ tomb to be open and empty and as messengers of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene and other female disciples helped

to set the Church going.

Yet Peter played the main leadership role in leading the emerging Church. In doing this, his prominence among the witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus was clearly a key factor – not the only factor but a key factor.

Likewise, the Twelve, Paul, Barnabas, married couples (for instance, Prisca and Aquila and Andronicus and Junia — *Romans* 16: 3, 7) and many other disciples announced to the world Christ's glorious victory over death. By their words and deeds, they testified to this unique good news. Among all those witnesses, Peter stood out as the leading witness to the risen Jesus.

The Holy Father will shortly make his first visit as pope to the United States. It is in the Easter season that he will come as Peter's successor. Like Peter, the Apostles and their successors, he is called to serve the whole Church by a threefold ministry of teaching, leading and sanctifying all its members. This threefold ministry finds its central focus when the pope announces to his diocese, the city of Rome and to the entire world the unique good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. May he continue to serve the faith and unity of all American Catholics and other Christians in the United States by proclaiming, through his words and deeds, the message at the heart of Christianity: Jesus is risen from the dead. Alleluia!

Alleluia!

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