

True Story.

Acts 10:34-43

Home Moravian Church, January 11, 2026

One of the great traditions of the Moravian Church is the funeral memoir. The memoir relates the life of the deceased, especially their spiritual path. Reading the memoir lifts up the life of the loved one, not just for our pleasure and memory, but for our spiritual edification. The life of the member becomes a spiritual example for us to consider and follow.

Our memoir tradition is solidly grounded in church history, not only because it was created by our 18th century forebears, but because the church itself—not the Moravian church, the *whole* church—was created, and persists, through storytelling. We exist because of the story of Jesus, and we persist because we keep telling the story. We lift up the life of Christ, consider what his example means to us and to the world, and are inspired to follow.

The book of Acts tells the story of how the church was built by telling stories. American theologian Will Willimon has said, “A story not only means something, but also *does* something.”¹ In the book of Acts, we see how the story of Jesus *does* something. It inspires belief and builds the Christian community that will become the church.

In today’s text, Peter tells the story of Jesus, summarizing all four gospels in a few plot points. He begins with Jesus’ baptism, passes through his crucifixion, repeats his command to preach and testify to his identity, and finishes with the assurance “that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

¹ William H. Willimon, *Acts: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 2.

We might have expected more detail. Cornelius, after all, is a Roman and not a Jew; doesn't he need some context? But actually, he's not a blank slate, religiously speaking. Acts calls him a "God-fearer," meaning that although not Jewish, he has come to believe in God and engages in Jewish practices like prayer and charitable giving. And when Peter says, "*You know* the message [God] sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ," we learn that Cornelius has at least heard Jesus' name. Of course he has! He's the head of an army unit in the Roman occupation; it's his job to keep his ear to the ground. He must have heard of a preacher named Jesus, stirring up the Jewish population.

But instead of seeking out Christians to put down unrest, he has sought out Peter—at an angel's command. Could Peter have a more receptive audience? All Cornelius needs to get started as a Christ-follower is a basic introduction to Jesus. All Peter needs is a story that *inspires*. Peter need bring nothing but good news!

But today's passage is not the only time in Acts that an apostle tells the story of Jesus; and usually, apostles are telling it to people with whom they share a history. In these encounters, telling the story of Jesus gets more complicated, because apostle and audience may disagree on just how that story played out. In those encounters, the story has a lot to do. The story has to establish truth in the face of falsehood; illuminate justice in the face of injustice; bring hope in the face of hopelessness. In these conditions, the story will have to confront, and call out, and speak truth to power.

The first telling comes at Pentecost, when the disciples begin speaking in languages they don't even know. The crowd murmurs and mocks: "These men are filled with new wine." Peter responds with storytelling that takes on the mockers and refutes the lie. He digs down deep in the Hebrew scriptures to show that the disciples are not drunk, but filled with God's spirit.

While retelling the story of Jesus' resurrection and lordship, he calls out the conspiracies and violence that led to Jesus' death. That is some hard storytelling—and it leads to 3,000 baptisms in a single day!

On another day, retelling Jesus' story in the Temple space called Solomon's Portico, Peter again condemns the cruel choices of those who sought Jesus' death. "You handed over and rejected [him] in the presence of Pilate," he says, "and asked to have a murderer given to you." This time the story doesn't go over so well; Peter and John are arrested and put in custody.

The next day, they are called before the Jewish council. Telling Jesus' story once again, Peter confronts the leaders with their lack of compassion, noting that the disciples' healing of a lame man—as Peter says, a "good deed done to someone who is sick"—has inspired the leaders only to suspicion and hostility.

Then comes the arrest of the apostle Stephen, accused of blasphemy. Stephen challenges the lie with a powerful and complex retelling of Jesus' story as it connects to the whole story of the Hebrew people, finishing with these words: "You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it." For fearlessly calling out the failings of his accusers, Stephen dies by stoning.

It was easy for Peter to tell Jesus' story to Cornelius, a stranger and religious outsider. Their very lack of shared history opened his eyes to God's intention for the story to reach an entirely new audience, the Gentiles.

But preaching to people of his background, his ethos, his nation—that was harder, because there was history in it. Hard and painful history, whose stories were sometimes told in different ways, for different ends. Remember: stories don't just *mean* something; they *do* something. The forces arrayed against the apostles told stories to achieve their own ends.

Stories like, “That man Jesus was trying to destroy our nation.” Or, “Those disciples must have been drunk as skunks.” Or, “If the lame are suddenly walking, it’s because Peter and John are using demonic powers.” All mocking, fear-mongering falsehoods intended to belittle, discredit, and destroy anyone deemed threatening to those in power.

Peter, Stephen, and the other apostles learn to their hurt how hard it is to tell Jesus’ story to people who, through whatever pain, anxiety, anger, confusion, disappointment, or loss, have fallen into habits of mockery, and falsehood, and lack of compassion. Maybe they have fallen so far that they are having trouble climbing back into their shared history, the things that their society together. That’s when the stories told by the disciples might have to do more than inspire someone; they might have to *rescue* someone. That kind of storytelling is really hard work. But the story of Jesus is a hardworking story, with the power to transform the story of any life, or all lives.

While working on this sermon, I read through the first nine chapters of Acts, everything that led up to Peter’s visit to Cornelius. After all that storytelling, I had heard enough conflict, enough confrontation, enough calling-out and enough difficult truth telling that by the time I arrived with Peter at Cornelius’s house, I felt a little beat up myself. But I came out of that hard period of storytelling with an invitation and a possibility. I clung to something Peter said in chapter three: “Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” *Times of refreshing*. I don’t know about you; but I sure could use a little refreshment these days.

The power of storytelling can be used for good, or for ill. Today, even as we all pray for the healing of our nation, we are thrown into constant confusion, battered on all sides by competing stories.

One way of sorting through the confusion is to ask not just what the stories *mean*, but what they *do*. Do they stoke our anger? Do they feed our pride? Do they make us feel threatened and afraid? Do they tempt us into habits of mockery, and falsehood, and lack of compassion? Do they steal our hope?

If so: then we need to tell stories of our own, as boldly as any apostle. Stories that inspire; stories that might even rescue. Stories that might also have to confront, and call out, and speak truth to power—so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and help us climb back into our own shared story. A true story that gives hope.

Will Willimon says that we all use stories to make sense of our own lives. As he says, “We are frightened creatures who, in the absence of a story which makes sense and gives us hope and security, can be counted upon to make up stories about ourselves in order to get by.” He goes on: “I need some story so coherent, so dependable, so truthful, yet so hopeful that it will enable me to tell *my* story truthfully.”

Whenever we have a funeral here at Home Church, people who are not Moravians come up to me afterwards and say, with a kind of wonder, “I’ve never been to a funeral so... hopeful!” My first feeling is sadness, to think that many funerals apparently are not hopeful; but then I feel grateful for our funeral tradition, in which a story lifts up a life as an example for us all to consider and follow. We know how to do this. We know how to tell a story so hopeful that it helps all of us climb back into the truth of who God made made us to be.

We know, because we know the most hopeful story of all: beginning with Jesus’ baptism, passing through his crucifixion, repeating his command to preach and testify to his identity, and finishing with the assurance “that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins

through his name.” Let us lift up that story, every day, with the words we use, and the lives we lead. Let us hold to the promise that this story will *do* something. Amen.