

What are you looking for?

Searching for Glory in the Gospel of John (12-21)

"Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."

John 17:1-5

The last few weeks we have been Searching for Signs in the Gospel of John (Chapters 1-11) focusing on the ministry of Jesus. For Lent, we continue searching in the Gospel of John by turning our attention to Searching for Glory. John writes in chapters 12-21 about the last week of Jesus' life and the days following his resurrection... a time when God's true glory is revealed.

We encourage you to read through the Gospel of John with fresh eyes and open hearts. We have chosen specific passages to read and discuss each Sunday on Zoom at 9am.

It's Lent 2021.... What ARE you looking for?

The hour has come...

Glory be to God...

Amen.

Prayer by Eugene Peterson (from *Living the Resurrection*)

Lord Jesus Christ, we come to you with a deep sense of gratitude, care, concern, devotion, love for you, and desire to live responsively to you.

We sense that we're with friends in your company of followers--- friends who share the life of resurrection and want others to get in on it, notice it, and begin participating at the center of what you're doing rather than on the periphery.

We pray for strength and discernment to understand the culture we are in-- -the deadening effects, the seductive lures. We pray that whatever has been said (in this class)---some of it, at least---to sharpen what we're doing.

We ask your blessing on your church---scattered and dispersed and so much of it in despair. We pray that wherever we are and whatever places we go back into---whether it's pew or pulpit---we may be part of this resurrection life, knowing that you are present and doing your work.

You're not anxious about what is going to happen or whether this is going to work or not. It's worked a long, long time and will continue working.

Mostly, keep us faithful, attentive, full of adoration, sacrificial, and personal. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

February 21, 2021

John 12:23, 27-36

²³ Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

.....

²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰ Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine.³¹ Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up^[9] from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

³⁴ The crowd spoke up, "We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?"

³⁵ Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. ³⁶ Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.

The Hour Has Come

By NT Wright (John for Everyone)

As I was walking into my study to begin working on this passage, I was alarmed to hear three loud explosions from the other side of the street. We live close to some important national buildings, and there is always a danger that terrorists will somehow succeed, despite all the security precautions, in placing a bomb there. It's happened before, and it could happen again. At once I rushed to the window and looked out.

To my relief, all I could see was a shower of coloured stars against the black night sky. It was a fireworks display. As I write this, it is going on, louder than ever. I wonder how many other people in the middle of the city jumped nervously at the first bang. Revolution or celebration? It all depends how you interpret the sudden noise.

This passage is one of the few in the New Testament where we are told that there was an actual, audible voice from heaven. And it's interesting to see what some people thought. They heard a noise--- and they thought it was thunder. Some people, knowing that Jesus had just prayed, thought that perhaps it was an angel answering him. Nobody seems to have said what John clearly believes was the case: it wasn't thunder, it wasn't an angel, it wasn't a bomb, it wasn't a fireworks display. It was God.

Of course, there was no way at the time that anybody could "prove" this, and we certainly can't do so two thousand years later. The more urgent task is to see what (according to John) the voice said, and the direction the whole conversation, if we can call it that, was taking.

Jesus had just said that the time had come. He had waited for this moment, for whatever sign he needed that he should move ahead to the climax of his brief but dramatic public career. When the Greeks came to the feast and asked to see him, this appears to have indicated to him that the time had arrived. And he was...

Proud that he had got to this point? No, I don't think so.

Exhilarated? Yes, so it seems, but that's not the first thing John says.

Ready to meet the moment with head held high? Well, eventually, yes, but that again isn't what John says.

Troubled. Yes: the **Word** that had become flesh, the one in whom the father's own love and power was truly seen, the one who healed the sick, turned water into wine, opened blind eyes and raised Lazarus to **life**: he was troubled. Deeply troubled, troubled right down in his heart.

Is your picture of God big enough for that? Or, when God speaks, do you just think it's thundering?

... The other gospels don't show us this side of Jesus, this internal, troubled discussion he has with himself, until we get to the garden of Gethsemane. John has brought it forward so that we see it now, in Jerusalem, before his arrest.

The key to it all, as often in John, is the glory of the father, and the way in which Jesus was totally committed to doing whatever was necessary to bring that glory about. He has come all this way, has prepared the ground, has spoken of the father's will and of how the world is to be saved; and is he now going to ask for a change of plan? His troubled heart knows that there is danger ahead, but also knows that it is *through* that danger, rather than by sliding safely past it, that the glory will shine out to the whole world. 'Father, glorify your name!'

That is the prayer that gets answered by thunder. God has glorified his name—he's done so already, in Jesus' extraordinary public career, in his mighty and loving works. And he will do so again. Be obedient, follow the way and watch.

He will glorify his name: because those who have usurped God's rule in the world, those who have laid it waste and trampled on the poor and exalted themselves as kings, lords and even as gods—all of them are now going to be condemned. 'Now is the judgment of this world! Now the world's ruler is going to be thrown out!' But it won't look like that. This was the language lots of people were expecting. It was the sort of talk you would associate with a would-be Messiah. The next thing you knew, he'd be telling you to sharpen your sword and help him attack the Roman garrison beside the Temple.

But Jesus wasn't that sort of Messiah. He was aiming to overthrow the kingdom of the world, all right, and replace it with the **kingdom of God**. But the victory was to be of a totally different sort. It was all about his being 'lifted up', exalted – on a pole, like the serpent in the wilderness (3.14-15). That's how the world would be rescued. That's how God, the true God, the God of astonishing, generous love, would be glorified. Swords don't glorify the creator-God. Love does. Self-giving love, best of all.

Jesus' hearers, of course, don't understand him. They hardly ever do, particularly in John's gospel.... They don't understand Jesus' obscure hints about his own death, about the strange '**son of man**' figure who would be 'lifted up'. John wants us to feel not only Jesus' frustration, as in their understanding they seem so close and yet so far away; he wants us to sense the disciples' puzzlement as well. What was Jesus up to? What did he really mean?

The only clue Jesus will give them at the moment is to speak again about light and darkness. The light is with them for a little while longer, and they must stick with it, walk in it and believe in it. So, must we.

February 28, 2021

John 13:1-16

Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

²The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

⁸"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

⁹"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

¹⁰Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

Jesus Getting Down and Dirty

By Will Willimon (from Thank God It's Thursday)

Feet are literally the lowest, earthiest part of the body. "To put under the feet" was a humiliating gesture of the victor over the vanquished. (Ps. 8:6) In the ancient world, feet got dirty on dusty roads (Mark 6:11). Washing a guest's feet was an act of highest hospitality (Genesis 18:4; Luke 7:44). Moses removed his shoes in a holy place in order not to defile (Ex. 3:5). To "fall at the feet" of someone is an act of humility and self-abasement (1 Sam. 25:24; Mk. 5:22). Just a few days before Maundy Thursday Mary anointed Jesus' feet (Jn. 12:1-8).

It's a touching gesture, washing of feet. It's nice to see the Pope kneel and wash the feet of a young priest Maundy Thursday at the Vatican. But when Jesus arrives at the feet of Judas, I react with revulsion. Amid all of Jesus' high sounding and loving words at the table, I almost forgot. At the table with the Twelve, there was Judas who a short time from now will by a kiss send Jesus off to a diabolical death.

In scripture, vanquished enemies are put under the victors' feet (Josh. 10:24; Mal. 4:3). Here at table, Jesus does a shocking reversal, placing himself under the feet of his worst enemy who also happens to be one of his good friends.

How much easier this gesture if it had been offered to the rest of the Twelve but not to Judas, if Jesus had drawn the line between the passive acquiesce with evil of the Eleven and the active betrayal of Judas. At least the others got not a dime from their disloyalty of their master. We wish that Jesus had waited until Judas made his exit before Jesus knelt and washed his disciples' feet.

No, there's Jesus tenderly caressing the feet of Judas as if he were the Beloved Disciple at his bosom. Judas will shortly use those same feet to walk from the meal to sell out his Savior. Is the foot washing John's version of Jesus' abrasive command to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44)? Or it's John's way of having Jesus say, as he says elsewhere, "I've come to seek and to save the lost"? (Luke 15) How much easier for us, the remaining

Eleven, if Jesus had not given his life (only) for sinners and if he had not stooped down and lovingly washed the feet of Judas Iscariot.

When the Alabama legislature passed a law that penalized our citizens for giving aid, comfort, food, housing, jobs or transportation to undocumented immigrants, many churches of Alabama knew that the immigration law as an attack upon our Christ-assigned work.

As I argued with the governor (and a retired Methodist pastor turned politician who shamelessly defended the law), “Unfortunately, Jesus doesn’t allow his people choose between the deserving and the undeserving poor, the documented and the undocumented homeless and hungry. He commands us actively to love all those in need.”

Some legislators replied, “But these people are *illegal*. The church shouldn’t be aiding and abetting law breakers.”

Hey, before Jesus Christ, so far as our relationship to God was concerned, we were all illegal! His New Covenant, given at table, documented a bunch of illicit sinners as God’s beloved. At the time I was dooking it out with our right wing, ill-advised Governor I didn’t think about this Judas-foot-washing episode from John 13, but I wish I had. If Jesus had reason to wash Judas’ feet, in effect aiding and abetting his own murderer, harboring the worst of criminals at his own table, well, he’ll wash anybody’s feet. Anybody’s – even mine, even the Governor’s, even yours, no matter where your dirty feet have taken you.

Judas receives more attention (13:1-30) than any other person in the story other than Jesus. Is this a warning to contemporary disciples? Thus, that great Catholic apologist for the faith, G. K. Chesterton dared to call Judas the very first Christian: “Judas Iscariot was one of the very earliest of all possible early Christians. And the whole point about him was that his hand was in the same dish; the traitor is always a friend, or he could never be a foe.” Sorry, if your idea of “Christian” is someone who has overcome the problem of sin and now sits at Jesus’ table with clean hands and a spotless conscience. Watch Jesus wash Judas’ feet and repeat after me: *Jesus Christ came to seek and to save sinners, only sinners.*

If Judas can be thought of as the first Christian, then that also makes this supper our earliest glimpse of the church.

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“Do you understand what I do?” (John 13:12), Jesus has the nerve to ask us.

“Well, not really,” we think in our hearts. Such boundary-breaking, risky, total love will always be for us an incomprehensible mystery. Fortunately, we need not fully understand it; we just have to do it.

“Watch me now,” he seems to say as he kneels, lit only by the flickering lights on the supper table. “Watch. Here’s how you do the discipleship thing. Here’s how to get really close to the true and living God. Watch. All you have to do is take a dirty, smelly foot of an outrageous criminal like Judas, hold it tenderly in your hand, and wash it as if you were caressing the hand of your most beloved friend. See? Is that so difficult?”

March 7, 2021

John 13:21-30

Jesus Predicts His Betrayal

Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me."

²² His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. ²³ One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. ²⁴ Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means."

²⁵ Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

²⁶ Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

So Jesus told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly."²⁸ But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. ²⁹ Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. ³⁰ As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

Judas – The Traitor

by John MacArthur (from Twelve Ordinary Men)

The most notorious and universally scorned of all the disciples is Judas Iscariot, the betrayer. His name appears last in every biblical list of apostles, except for the list in Acts 1, where it doesn't appear at all. Every time Judas is mentioned in Scripture, we also find a notation about his being a traitor. He is the most colossal failure in all of human history. He committed the most horrible, heinous act of any individual, ever. He betrayed the perfect, sinless, holy Son of God for a handful of money. His dark story is a poignant example of the depths to which the human heart is capable of sinking. He spent three years with Jesus Christ, but for all that time his heart was only growing hard and hateful.

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Judas name is a form of *Judah*. The name means "Jehovah leads," which indicates that when he was born his parents must have had great hopes for him to be led by God. The irony of the name is that no individual was ever more clearly led by Satan than Judas was.

His surname, *Iscariot*, signifies the region he came from. It is derived from the Hebrew term *ish* (man) and the name of a town, Kerioth -- "man of Kerioth." Judas probably came from Kerioth-hezron, a humble town in the south of Judea. He was apparently the only one of the apostles who did not come from Galilee. As we know, many of the others were brothers, friends, and working companions even before meeting Christ. Judas was a solitary figure who entered their midst from afar.

The Galilean disciples' unfamiliarity with Judas would have aided and abetted him in his deception. The others knew little about his family, his background, or his life before he became a disciple. So it was easy for him to play the hypocrite. He was able to work his way into a place of trust, which we know he did, because he ultimately became the treasurer of the group and used that position to pilfer funds (John 12:6).

Judas was ordinary in every way, just like the others. It is significant that when Jesus predicted one of them would betray Him, no one pointed the finger of suspicion at Judas. He was so expert in his

hypocrisy that no one seemed to distrust him. But Jesus knew his heart from the beginning (John 6:64)

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John 13 begins the apostle John's lengthy account of what happened in the Upper Room on the night of Jesus' arrest. Having already taken money to betray Christ, Judas came back, blended into the group, and pretended nothing unusual had happened. John says it was the devil who put it in the heart of Judas to betray Jesus (v. 2). That is no surprise. Again, Judas did what he did willingly, without any coercion. Satan could not force him to betray Jesus. But Satan through some means suggested the plot, tempted Judas to do this thing, and planted the very seed of treachery in his heart. Judas' heart was so hostile to the truth and so filled with evil that Judas became a willing instrument of Satan himself.

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Notice that even though Jesus had just spoken of the betrayer and had given Judas the morsel to identify him, it still did not compute in the minds of the apostles. No one seemed to anticipate that Judas would be the traitor. So expert was he in his hypocrisy that he fooled everyone but Jesus, right up to the very end.

Judas Will Now Take Your Confession

By Nadia Bolz-Weber (from Accidental Saints)

After Peter denied Jesus, he experienced Easter, but after Judas betrayed Jesus, he bought a field, tripped and fell, and his guts burst open. He died alone in a field of blood. He died knowing that he was a sinner and perhaps thinking that God did not want him.

There was no Easter for Judas. There was no Resurrection. There was no light shining which the darkness could not overcome. Judas never got to be filled with joy and disbelief at Pentecost like those in the upper room. He never got to stick his fingers in the wounds of God. He never got to eat sacramental broiled fish on a beach, served to him by the resurrected Christ. Judas never experienced the defeat of sin and death revealed in the breaking of bread. He chose death before seeing death was done for. Our brother Judas.

But was what he did so unforgivable? How is it that Judas, who betrayed Jesus once and was filled with remorse, became the villain, while Peter, who denied Jesus three times and wept bitterly, became the rock on which the church was built? When it comes down to it, what is the difference between Peter and Judas? Well, maybe nothing. And maybe there's not a whole lot of difference between us and them too.

But we get to share something with Peter that Judas never got to experience and it's the thing that could have made all the difference. In Judas' isolation, he never availed himself to the means of grace. Judas carried with him into that field the burden of not experiencing God's grace because he was removed from the community in which he could hear it. In Judas' ears there never was placed a word of grace. And let me tell you, that's not something the sinner can create for him or herself. It is next to impossible in isolation to manufacture the beautiful, radical grace that flows from the heart of God to God's broken and blessed humanity.

As human beings, there are many things we can create for ourselves: entertainment, stories, pain, toothpaste, maybe even positive self-talk. But it is difficult to create this thing that frees us from the bondage of self. We cannot create for ourselves God's word of grace. We must tell it to each other. It's terribly inconvenient and oftentimes uncomfortable way for things to happen. Were we able to receive the word of God through pious, private devotion --- through quiet personal time with God --- the Christian life would be far less messy, but as Paul tells us, faith comes through hearing, and hearing implies having someone right there doing the telling.

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This is why we have Christian community. So that we can stand together under the cross and point to the gospel. A gospel that Bonhoeffer said is "frankly hard for the pious to understand. Because this grace confronts us with the truth saying: You are a sinner, a great, desperate sinner, now come as the sinner you are to God who loves you."

God wants you, you in your imperfect, broken, shimmering glory.

March 14, 2021

John 13:31-36

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him,^[c] God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

³³ "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

³⁶ Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?"

Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."

(Let Jesus Show)

By Frederick Buechner

When Jesus sat down to eat for the last time with a handful of his closest friends, he knew it was the last time, and he didn't have to be the Messiah to know it—they all did. The Romans were out to get him. The Jews were out to get him. For reasons that can only be guessed at, one of his own friends was out to get him, and Jesus seems to have known that too. He knew, in other words, that his time had all but run out and that they would never all of them be together again.

It is an unforgettable scene there in that upper room—the shadows, the stillness, the hushed voices of people speaking very carefully, very intently, because they wanted to get it all said while there was still time and to get it said right. You can only imagine the way it must have haunted them for the rest of their lives as they looked back on how they had actually sat there with him, eating and drinking and talking; and through their various accounts of it, including this morning's passage from John, and through all the paintings of it, like the great, half ruined da Vinci fresco in Milan, and through two thousand years of the church's reenactment of it in the Eucharist, it has come to haunt us too. But I think of the Last Supper as haunting in another way as well—not just as a kind of shadowy dream of an event long past but also as a kind of foreshadowing of an event not all that far in the future, by which I mean our own last suppers, the last time you and I will sit down with a handful of our own closest friends.

It's hard not to believe that somehow or other there's always going to be another time with them, another day, so the chances are we won't know it's the last time, and therefore it won't have the terrible sadness about it that the Last Supper of Jesus must have had. But not knowing is sad in another way because it means that we also won't know how precious this supper is, how precious these friends are whom we will be sitting down with for the last time whether we know it or not.

Who are these friends for you, who are they for me? We have to picture them for ourselves, of course—to see their faces, hear their

voices, feel what it's like to be with them. They are our nearest and dearest—our husband or wife, our children, a few people we can't imagine living without or their living without us—and the sadness is that we have known them so long and so well that we don't really see them anymore for who they truly are let alone who they truly are to us, who we truly are to them. The sadness is that we don't see that every supper with them—even just a bowl of cornflakes in the kitchen some night after the movies—is precious beyond all telling because the day will come beyond which there will be no other supper with them ever again. The time will come when time will run out for us too, and once we see that, we see also that for the eighteen-year-old at McDonald's as well as for the old crotch in the retirement-home cafeteria, every one of our suppers points to the preciousness of life and also to the certainty of death, which makes life even more precious still and is precious in itself because under its shadow we tend to search harder and harder for light.

There in that shadowy room the disciples turned to Jesus, who was their light, with greater urgency and passion than maybe ever before because, with all hell about to break loose, they had no other place to turn. They had drunk the wine he told them was his blood and put into their mouths the bread he told them was his body, and thus with something of his courage in them they asked him a question they had never risked asking so helplessly and directly before. It was Simon Peter who asked it, and what he said was, "Lord, where are you going?"

As if they didn't know. As if they didn't know. As if you and I don't know—both where he was going and where all of us are going too. He was going down the stairs and out the door. He was going into the night. He was going to pray in a garden to the God he called Father not to let the awful thing happen to him that he knew was already happening, and the Gospels do not record that he got so much as a whisper in reply. He was going alone, and he was going against his will, and he was going scared half out of his wits. He sweated blood is the way the Gospels put it.

The Last Supper not only prefigures our own last suppers wherever and whenever they are to be. It also is our last supper. You cannot read the account of it without in some measure being there, and the table where he sits with his friends is our table, and as they drew close to the light of him, we too try to draw close as if maybe in the

last analysis he is the one who is our nearest and dearest—or our farthest and dearest because he is always just too far away to see very well, to take hold of, too far away to be sure he sees us. If we have any hope at all, he is our hope, and when Peter asks him, "Lord, where are you going?" the question within his question is "Are you going anywhere at all or just going out, like a light," and that is also our question both about him and about ourselves. When time runs out, does life run out? Did Jesus's life run out? Do you and I run out?

"You will seek me," Jesus says, and no word he ever spoke hits closer to home. We seek for answers to our questions—questions about life and about death, questions about what is right and what is wrong, questions about the unspeakable things that go on in the world. We seek for strength, for peace, for a path through the forest. But Christians are people who maybe more than for anything else seek for Christ, and from the shabbiest little jerry-built meeting house in the middle of nowhere to the greatest cathedrals, all churches everywhere were erected by people like us in the wild hope that in them, if nowhere else, the one we seek might finally somehow be found.

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I think that what we are to do is to try to draw near to him and to each other any way we can because that is the last thing he asked of us. "Love one another as I have loved you" is the way he said it.... By believing against all odds and loving against all odds, that is how we are to let Jesus show in the world and to transform the world.

March 21, 2021

John 14:1-14

Jesus Comforts His Disciples

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Jesus the Way to the Father

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

⁹ Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.

¹² Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

The Absence of Christ

By Fred Craddock (from the Cherry Log Sermons)

Once upon a time, not in a fairy tale sense, but once upon God's time, there was a man in the little country of Israel from the town of Nazareth named Jesus. Early in his adult life, those who knew him, or at least many of those who knew him, began to see he was more than the son of Mary, more than the son of Joseph, more than a mere carpenter. There was something about him that made them think "God." His character, his words, his work, what he did, what he said, the way he behaved, made them believe that when they were in his presence they were in the presence of God.

This doesn't mean that in some obvious way he was different. He didn't shine in the night, he didn't dress in unusual clothes, he didn't have a strange look on his face, he didn't go around saying a lot of religious things all the time. It is just that who he was and what he did and the way he related to people caused them to say, "He is a revelation of God and in him we have seen God's glory."

....

Of course, only a minority of humanity experienced God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And some of those who followed him quit. When the price got a little high, they turned away, and this prompted Jesus to say to his immediate friends, "Are you going to leave too?" They said, "Where would we go?" You have the words of eternal life." And so it was. No one has ever seen God, but the only begotten son from the bosom of God has made God known. This is the reason he came into the world: to reveal God.

The painful side of it, however, is that, just as Jesus came into the world, he had to go from the world and return to God. During his life, his brief life here on earth, he bonded with a lot of people. He had family. The other Gospel writers tell us about his brothers and his sisters. He had a mother. He had friends. Toward the close of his life, he said to his disciples, "I don't call you 'servants' anymore, I call you 'friends.'" John says that he loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus, their brother. He had bonded with a lot of people. But then he had to go.

The deeper the bond, the more painful the absence. That's just a plain

fact; we know that. Even on occasions that seem not to have a heaviness about them, it is there. All the years that I was a teacher, I never liked commencement because of the hypocrisy of saying, "Isn't it wonderful to be out of this place!" and tossing that square lid in the air with tears in the eyes. It bothered me. I don't mean that commencement is hypocritical in the negative sense. It is just one of those days when you have to put on like you are totally 100 percent glad this day has come, when the fact of the matter is one is going to New York, another is going to Kansas, and another is going to South Georgia, and the deeper bond, the more painful the absence.

....

This pain, this pain of absence, is intensified if the occasion for absence is death, as it was in the case of Jesus. Death makes absence so complete and final. ...Death doesn't care. You know as well as I do. You read the paper; you watch the news. Littleton, Colorado--- fourteen years old, they said. Fifteen years old, they said. She was just sixteen years old.... What do you mean? They're just teenagers. Did you see those wreaths and those flowers? Did you see those students embracing each other? How long will it take them to lose the pain of absence? Years.

I think of Jesus, snatched away from his friends and family. Absence is even more painful sometimes when we consider the way somebody dies.... And I think of Jesus. Does that make sense, up there on the cross? Do you know what they did? They stripped him naked. They put him up there in front of everybody. Vulgar-mouthed soldiers did. Unbelievers walked by, saying, "If you are the Son of God, God will get you down." Somebody else yelled, "Why don't you jump, Jesus?" Think of the girl in Littleton. "Do you believe in God?" they asked her, and she said yes. Make sense of it.

The pain of absence is even more intense when you think about the character of the one who goes away.... It just seems by the nature of their character that the pain is intensified--- and I think of Jesus. I have never in my life heard anybody say that there was ever an occasion when Jesus turned his back on human need, said a cruel word to anybody, hurt anyone, rejected anyone, excluded anyone. It is his character that makes his absence so much more keenly felt.

Jesus knew this. He knew the depth of the pain created by absence, so, in John 13-21 he became a counselor to his friends, and he is still

talking to them. He is trying to soften the blow, trying to get them ready. He says, "I know I'm leaving, now listen to me. You trust God, trust in me. I am going, it is true, but I am going to prepare a place for you, so that when I come again, we will all be together forever. I will send another counselor while I am gone, and he will guide you into truth and be with you and help you and will never leave you. The Holy Spirit will be with you."

Jesus is trying to get them ready for his absence. Does he succeed? I don't think so. They are still confused, still asking questions. "We don't know where you are going or how you are going to get there. We don't understand anything you're saying. Just show us God, and we will be satisfied. We don't know what you're talking about. We don't like all this."

It didn't work; it never works at the time. Jesus tried to get them to ready, but you can talk and talk and talk and there is still the pain. Jesus left his disciples and they felt his absence keenly and painfully. It just doesn't seem to work until later.

Do you believe that God is ever absent from you? Do you believe that God ever withdraws from you, that God is not close to you? I'm not setting you up for anything. I do know that a lot of people say they experience the absence of God, but this is not to say that God is really absent; they just experience God as absent.

....

I don't know if God grows distant from us. I do know that sometimes we feel some distance. How do we manage that? How do we live with the experience of distance from God? I think mainly it is a matter of memory. Remember the good times. Remember the close occasions. Remember the profound worship. Remember the Lord's Table. Remember your baptism. Remember the bread and the cup. Remember your Christian friends. Remember the old songs, and you will get through. I just hurts me to think of the young people who do not know a hymn, who do not know a single scripture verse, and who have never sat next to the strong shoulder of a believing man or woman. How will they ever make it? You see, what we do here on Sunday, in case you're wondering, is that we are making memories. What happens today will be the only food you will have one of these days. But it will be enough. It will be enough.

March 28, 2021

John 19:25-27

²⁵ Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman,^[b] here is your son,"²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Woman, Here is Your Son

By Susan Robb

(from *Seven Words: Listening to Christ from the Cross*)

As I write this book, the world looks very different from the one I inhabited just a few months earlier. The global pandemic that at this point has killed, in growing numbers, hundreds of thousands of people around the world, has disrupted almost every facet of life here. Each day, it seems, a new space or community in which we lived and navigated is sealed off due to COVID-19, and we have to become creative in finding new ways to do or access old things.

...

Like it or not, we live in “interesting” times. They leave us with question after question. Will people whose lives have been disrupted and demolished physically or financially ever be the same? How will our most vulnerable fare in the midst of this pandemic? Will we be able to find the courage, strength of voice, and means necessary to create a safe place for them, and to create a better, less vitriolic, less polarized world?

In life we are continually required to find new ways to do and access old ways of being. We continually wonder how we will navigate the challenges that lie ahead of us. We often wonder if our lives can be the way we imagine, or the way God imagines life for us.

Jesus’ words, spoken from the cross in the Gospel of John, present us with a lens through which to consider these questions and musings, and they offer an invitation into a new way of being.

As Jesus tenderly speaks directly to two of the dearest people in his life, his mother and one of his closest friends and disciples, he offers us a glimpse of hope for the days ahead and a new way to access and accomplish the life and world God imagines. How could Jesus possibly have conveyed all that in the simple words, “Woman, here is your son?”

.....

Among Jesus’ followers, the Gospels focus most of their attention on the twelve men Jesus called to follow him. But it’s also clear from these texts that many others traveled with Jesus during his ministry, and women were always part of that group.

All four Gospels mention women who were brave enough to follow Jesus to the cross and witness his crucifixion.... The women's names and number vary from Gospel to Gospel.... John's Gospel mentions four (John 19:25): Mary the wife of Clopas; Mary Magdalene; Jesus's aunt (referenced only as "his mother's sister"); and one named only in terms of her relationship to Jesus, "his mother" (whose name we know from the other Gospels but that John does not mention).

.....

At the cross, the scene is poignant. A lone male disciple, again described only in terms of his relationship to Jesus, accompanies this group of devoted and grieving women, remaining close not only to Jesus, but also to Jesus' mother. "The disciple whom he loved: (19:26), probably Jesus's best friend, stands beside Jesus's mother. Now that the hour of his death and glorification has come, Jesus offers the two people he loves most in the world some tender last words --- words we are meant to overhear. When Jesus sees the two of them standing side by side at the cross, his heart is filled with compassion for his mother's grief and welfare, and he tenderly says to her, "Woman, here is your son." And to the disciple he says, "Here is your mother." Scripture goes on to tell us, "And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home" (19:26-27). Jesus' dying words are similar to those we hear from so many who yearn to impart their dying wishes to those they love--- to their families--- before their death: "Take care of each other." While they are similar on one level, on another they offer a yet deeper meaning.

....

When Jesus looks down at his grieving mother and the disciple and says, "'Woman, here is your son'....'Here is your mother," he is doing more than ensuring his mother is cared for after his death. The relationship that Jesus' mother and the disciple whom he loved share with Jesus, the same relationship we can share with Jesus, creates a new kind of family.

Many scholars assume that Jesus' mother is a widow at the time of his death, since the last time Joseph is mentioned in any of the Gospels is in the story of Jesus' visit to the Temple as a twelve-year-old (Luke 2:41-51). Jesus' brothers would have assumed the responsibility of caring for their mother's welfare upon the death of

her oldest son. Leaving his mother in the care of the Beloved Disciple is an act of creation --- as Jesus creates and defines a new family of faith. While the defining moment in the birth of the church in the Book of Acts is described in the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit on the believers at Pentecost (Acts 2), in John's Gospel the creation of the church begins at the cross. Jesus, through the words he speaks to his mother and friend, creates the church, and that church becomes family to one another! Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple are not blood relatives, but they have developed a spiritual kinship through their trust in Jesus and his heavenly Father, a kinship that is cemented in the hour of Jesus' death.

In the moment that he leaves his mother and the Beloved Disciple in the care of one another, Jesus left all who would be future followers --- he left *us*, his family --- in the care of one another as well.

The novel coronavirus, for all of the bad that has happened, has not only forced us to find new ways to do old things but has also called us to take stock of what is really important in life. I've never seen more families, more moms and dads and children and grandparents, out walking and riding bikes as I have during these past few months. There have been more phone calls and FaceTime with friends and family.... We are trying our best to support our local businesses from afar. But more importantly, this time has given me, and I hope this season gives you, time to lean in and listen to Jesus. Time to stand near his cross and really hear his words. Time to cling to the one who is unchanging in uncertain times....

As you wait for Easter and Resurrection, ask yourself, "Where do I need more abundance, more newness of life? What or who in my sphere of influence needs more abundance or newness of life? How is Jesus calling me to be family to someone else?"

Death did not have the last word in Jesus' life. The coronavirus, the stock market, the political climate, or whatever the *crisis du jour* may be: these will not have the last word on our lives either... Through the power of the resurrected Christ, we can be something new, something transformed. Jesus can take what seems a demolished mess and turn it into something beautiful. Let that be our hope because that is his promise. Lean in. Listen. Be family to one another.

April 11, 2021

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus Appears to Thomas

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The Purpose of John's Gospel

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Take a Breath

By Barbara Brown Taylor

(A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 23, 2017)

Grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am so glad to be with you today, on the Sunday After.

...There aren't many Week After stories in the gospels. Mark is in such a hurry that he wraps things up with the empty tomb. Matthew adds a few lines about Jesus appearing to the disciples in the Galilee, commissioning them to carry on. Luke tells a great story about a stranger meeting up with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, but that happens on the same day Jesus vanishes from his tomb, and the minute the disciples recognize the stranger, he's gone, carried up into heaven and out of their sight.

John is the only one who lingers on what it's like to be a disciple after Easter. He's the only one with a Week After story, about Jesus and a disciple called Didymus, the Twin--better known to most of us as Doubting Thomas, because he had some trust issues that the other disciples did not.

Or at least that's the allegation. If you think about it, he wasn't any less trusting than the rest of them. When Mary Magdalene ran home from the cemetery to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple that Jesus wasn't in his tomb, they didn't believe her either. *They ran to see for themselves.* When Jesus came back that same night to the house where the disciples were hiding, they believed because *they saw him for themselves.*

The only reason Thomas got singled out was because he wasn't there. He didn't get to see anything for himself, which is why he had questions the others didn't have. They had evidence. He had hearsay. He wasn't trying to decide whether or not he believed Jesus had risen from the dead. He was trying to decide whether or not he believed what the other disciples told him, and he decided he didn't--couldn't--until he saw for himself what they had seen. So, his trust issue wasn't with Jesus. It was with his brothers.

Over the past couple of weeks, I asked some people who know the Thomas story what they think about him (it takes a village to make a sermon) and they all said the same thing: they know they're supposed to disapprove of him but they don't. They like his honesty. They know where he's coming, from. They're actually *grateful* for him, because he's their proof that even people who were *right there* had trouble believing that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Like the other disciples, Thomas had heard Jesus' best sermons (sometimes more than once). He knew how far Jesus could walk in a day and what he liked for supper. He had witnessed the healings, the feedings, the raising of Lazarus. Thomas had even heard Jesus predict his own death, though nothing had prepared him for the brutality of it. Afterwards, Thomas was as ruined as the rest of them by what had happened. Then he was as baffled as the rest of them when Mary came home from the cemetery for the second time and said *she* had seen the Lord.

After that, Thomas became the missing disciple, the one who wasn't there. He wasn't there in the house with the others that night, wasn't there when Jesus came and stood among them, wasn't there when he gave them his peace, showed them his wounds, gave them power over sin, and bid them receive the Holy Spirit—basically everything he had to bring his little church back to life.

Before they saw him, all they had been able to see was the end of them. That locked up house was the end of the line for them, the end of the vision they had walked away from all other visions of their lives to serve. They had the breath knocked out of them. They could not remember how to breathe.

...Before Jesus came to them, that is what had the disciples all locked up. Then he came to breathe on them and their fear turned to rejoicing. Somehow he knew that was what they needed more than anything. They had to be able to breathe before they could hear anything else. So, he gave them divine CPR—gave them his own breath to bring them back to life—like God creating humankind all over again, only this time the breath came from the lungs of the Christ.

And Thomas wasn't there.

In the usual interpretation of the story, his problem was that he needed physical proof that God had raised Jesus from the dead. He was the holdout, the agnostic, the guy who wouldn't take anyone else's word for anything. He wanted to weigh the evidence for himself, and unless he was able to do that, Thomas said, he would not believe.

It reminds me of ...*The Trial of Jesus from a Lawyer's Standpoint* and other books like that, which aim to convince readers by way of facts. It's certainly possible that was what Thomas was holding out for: facts. If he could have taken a DNA sample from Jesus' side, he would have, and he wouldn't have committed himself one way or the other until the results were in.

But if you listen to what he says, another possibility opens up. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands," Thomas says, "and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." It's the wounds he wants to see, not the face. He wants to touch the places where the Jesus he knew so well was hurt, where the spear went into his side even after he was dead.

So, here's the other possibility: what if Thomas isn't holding out for proof that Jesus came *back* from all of that? What if he is holding out for proof that Jesus hasn't come back *divorced* from all of that? What if he needs to see for himself that the risen one is the same one who died—who has not come back all healed up and good as new but who has returned to his friends with visible evidence that he will never leave what is most human about him behind?

If that's a possibility, then Thomas isn't looking for *physical* proof of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He is looking for *existential* proof that the one whom God has raised up is the same one who was damaged beyond all human repair. He is looking for evidence that this Messiah knows everything there is to know about the worst kind of breathlessness and will never discount it, neither here nor in the hereafter. Otherwise, what should Thomas believe? That Jesus' new life in God has nothing to do with his old one? That faith means seeing the wounded world as a passing illusion?

Thomas wasn't having it. He wanted to see the marks on Jesus' body. He wanted to reach out his real hand and touch Jesus' real wounds.

Only then would he believe that it mattered, that Jesus' resurrected life meant something for every life, no matter how hurt and scared.

One of my favorite teachers says that if you are still breathing, there is more right with you than wrong with you. Thomas put it more forcefully, once he had seen the marks on Jesus' body for himself. "My Lord and my God!" he said, and he wasn't the missing disciple anymore. Thomas was back—a week late, but back--and Jesus didn't seem to mind coming back for him alone.

So, take a breath, you faithful ones, still here after all these years—the Week After, the Week After that, and all the weeks to come. Blessed are you who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe.

The Lord is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed.

April 18, 2021

John 20:21-22

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

Breath

By Rachel Held Evans (from Searching for Sunday)

The spirit is like breath, as close as the lungs, the chest, the lips, the fogged canvas where little fingers draw hearts, the tide that rises and falls twenty-three thousand times a day in a rhythm so intimate we forget to notice until it enervates or until a supine yogi says **pay attention** and its fragile power awes again.

Inhale. Exhale. Expand. Release. In the beginning, God breathed. And the dust breathed back enough oxygen, water, and carbon dioxide to make an atmosphere, to make a man. Job know life as “the breath of God in my nostrils,” given and taken away. With breath, the Creator kindled the stars, parted a sea, woke a valley of dry bones, inspired a sacred text. So, too, the Spirit, inhaled and exhaled in a million quotidian ways, animates, revives, nourishes, sustains, speaks. It is as near as the nose and as everywhere as the air, so **pay attention...**

The Spirit is like fire, deceptively polite in its dance atop the wax and wick of our church candles, but wild and mercurial as a storm when unleashed. Fire holds no single shape, no single form. It can roar through a forest or fulminate in a cannon. It can glow in hot coals or flit about in embers. But it cannot be held. The living know it indirectly—through heat, through light, through tendrils of smoke snaking through the sky, through the scent of burning wood, through the itch of ash in the eye. Fire consumes. It creates in its destroying and destroys in its creating. The furnace that smelts the ore drives off slag, and the flame that refines the metal purifies the gold. The fire that torches a centuries-old tree can crack open her cones and spill out their seeds. When God led his people through the wilderness, the Spirit blazed in a fire that rested over the tabernacle each night. And when God made the church, the Spirit blazed in little fires that rested over his people’s heads. “Quench not the Spirit,” the apostle wrote. It is as necessary and as dangerous as fire, so stay alert; **pay attention...**

The Spirit is like a seal, an emblem bearing the family crest, a promise of belonging, protection, favor. Like a signet ring to soft wax, the Spirit impresses the supple heart with the power and prestige of God, and no one—not kings, not presidents, not the wealthy, nor the magisterium—can take that identity away. The bond of God is made of viscous stuff. He has put his seal on us, wrote the apostle, and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee (1 Corinthians 1:22). In the rite of confirmation, which acknowledges the presence of the Spirit in a believer's life, a thumb to the forehead reminds God's children of their mark: the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's as invisible as your breath but as certain as your skin, so **pay attention**; don't forget who you are.

The Spirit is like wind, earth's oldest sojourner, which in one place readies a sail, in another whittles a rock, in another commands the trees to bow, in another gently lifts a bridal veil. Wind knows no perimeter. The wildest of all wild things, it travels to every corner of a cornerless world and amplifies the atmosphere. It smells like honeysuckle, curry, smoke, sea. It feels like a kiss, a breath, a burn, a sting. It can whisper or whistle or roar, bend and break and inflate. It can be harnessed, but never stopped or contained; its effects observed while its essence remains unseen. To chase the wind is folly, they say, to try and tame it the very definition of futility. "The wind blows wherever it pleases," Jesus said. "You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). We are born into a windy world, where the Spirit is steady as a breeze and as strong as a hurricane. There is no city, no village, no wilderness where you cannot find it, so **pay attention**.

The Spirit is like a bird, fragile alloy of heaven and earth, where wind and feather and flight meets breath and blood and bones. The rabbis imagined her as a pigeon, the Celts a wild goose. Like a dove, she glided over the primordial waters, hovered above Mary's womb, and descended onto Jesus' dripping wet head. She protected Israel like an eagle, and like a hen, brooded over her chicks. "Hide me in the shadow of your wings," the poet king wrote. "Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings" (Psalm 17:8, 63:7). The Spirit is as common as a cooing pigeon and transcendent as a high-flying eagle. So look up and sing back, catch the light of God in a diaphanous scrim of wing. **Pay attention**.

The Spirit is like a womb, from which the living are born again. We emerge—lashes still wet from the water, eyes unadjusted to the light—into a reanimated and freshly charged world. There are so many new things to see, so many gifts to give and receive, so many miracles to baffle and amaze, if only we *pay attention*, if only we let the Spirit surprise and God catch our breath.

April 25, 2021

John 21:1-14

Jesus and the Miraculous Catch of Fish

21 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

⁶ He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

“Why Peter?”

by Eugene Peterson (from *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*)

Peter, for all his prominence in telling the gospel story, does not strike me as a very promising leader for people like us who need someone to step out and tell us how to follow Jesus, to provide insight and wisdom in being a Christian. Most of what Peter does and says in relation to Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is wrong. And not just a little wrong, but dead wrong. He was wrong at Caesarea Philippi when, after confessing Jesus as the Christ, he then tried to prevent Jesus from going to Jerusalem to his crucifixion. He was wrong on the Mount of Transfiguration when he tried to turn the glory of God into a tourist attraction for pilgrims. He was wrong at the foot washing when he tried to distance himself from the humility of Jesus. He was wrong in Gethsemane at the arrest of Jesus when he cut off Malchus's ear, thinking he could serve Jesus by using violence. I don't think I'd want him for my pastor.

That's why I find it interesting that Saint John. Whom I consider the patron saint of those who follow Jesus, writes the conclusion to his gospel using three stories that feature Peter.

Picture John at his writing desk. He has just finished writing his magnificent gospel. Reading this book, we find ourselves in the company of Jesus, who is using words to create life in us and in the people we live with. We find ourselves in these scenes and conversations, and we determine to spend our lives following Jesus through thick and thin, wherever he leads us.

One of the serious misunderstandings that sometimes develops among people like us who worship and serve together in Christian congregations is that there is a spiritual world quite different from the ordinary world in which we make a living and have our babies. It is a struggle to keep our minds on God when we have taxes and diapers demanding our attention.

But John will have none of that: God becomes flesh and blood in Jesus, moves into the neighborhood, and uses words that any five-year-old can understand, words like *light* and *bread* and *door* and *water* and *wind*. John shows Jesus getting us deeper into this world

that we ever thought possible, not getting us out of it. Jesus is totally at home here, ranging from the wine and cake at the wedding festivities in Cana to the stinking corpse of Lazarus in Bethany. John tells us this quite incredible story in a slow, leisurely way, bringing in a large cast of men and women with their various responses.

All of this is brought to a most satisfying climax in the resurrection of Jesus, as in swift succession Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty, Peter and John race to the place to see what happened, and Jesus and Mary exchange poignant greetings in the garden. Mary reports the encounter to the other disciples; Jesus appears to them in flesh and blood---alive---blesses and commissions them and a week later does it again, this time with the earlier reluctant, unbelieving Thomas enthusiastically embracing the band of resurrection believers, joining them with exclamatory surprise: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)

That's quite a conclusion, don't you think? After pages and pages of slow, spiraling, repetitive, relaxed, leisurely conversation, this sudden, dramatic change of pace brings us to the edge of our seats. Resurrection ---wow! What is John up to? And why Peter?

John gives us three stories featuring Peter. The first Peter story takes place on a beach in Galilee sometime after that first resurrection week. The disciples had been ordained by Jesus to continue his work: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). For reasons undisclosed to us, seven of the now eleven disciples are back at their old fishing ground, Peter having organized his friends for a night of fishing. (We're not told why four are missing.)

It seems like a total non sequitur. After their extended time --- three years --- immersed in the company of Jesus, the drama of those years, the adrenaline of the resurrection week, and all of it coming to a personal focus as Jesus breathed his own Spirit into them and ordained them to continue his words and acts, what are they doing back *fishing*, of all things? Why aren't they halfway around the world by now, speaking and acting in the name of Jesus?

Here is what I think was going on: whatever Peter and his friends previously imagined about the resurrection did not prepare them for

what they are dealing with now. Resurrection, if you believe in it, has to do with the next life. It is something that happens to you after you are dead and buried and find yourself in heaven. But Jesus's resurrection took place on earth. And these first witnesses were not in heaven. They were walking the same old roads over the same old ground they had grown up on, talking and working with the same old people they had grown up with.

They saw resurrection take place *on earth*. With their own eyes they saw Jesus die on a cross. And with these same eyes, they saw him alive three days later, eating and talking with them.

It is now absolutely clear that resurrection has to do with them--- on earth. My feeling is that this may have been even more difficult to wrap their minds around than Jesus' resurrection itself. Jesus was radically reconfigured and redefined by resurrection. Now they were being just as radically reconfigured and redefined by resurrection. The familiar concept of resurrection as life after death was totally recast as life "in the land of the living" (Psalm 116:9).

And so, Peter led his friends out of the holy city of Jerusalem, the religious center, back to the country they grew up in, Galilee, their home and workplace. Fear may have had something to do with it, fear that those who killed Jesus might come after them next. But I think there was something other than that --- an instinct for the local and the ordinary, a sense that if they were going to assimilate and live this resurrection life, they had to start out in the place they knew best and do the work they knew best.

I think that's why the seven former fishermen were back fishing that night. They needed an immersion in ordinariness, so they plunged into their old routines, the familiar workplace of sea and fishing boats and nets in order to experience and practice resurrection on *earth*.

As it turned out, they were not conspicuously successful during that night. Maybe they had lost their touch. "They caught nothing."

Dawn breaks. Jesus is standing on the beach. The disciples, a hundred yards from shore, don't recognize him. He calls to them and learns

they have caught nothing. He directs them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. When they do it, their nets fill with fish.

John recognizes the stranger as Jesus and tells Peter, "It's the Master!" Peter dives into the water and swims to shore to greet Jesus, leaving his companions to the work of rowing and dragging in the fish. On shore they find that Jesus has already prepared a meal of fish and bread. Jesus is also back in Galilee, the territory they know best, the environment in which Jesus' humanity had been demonstrated so thoroughly. He calls them to the meal: "Breakfast is ready." The seven disciples, sweaty and smelly in their work clothes and slimy from the fish, eat a resurrection breakfast on the same ground where they have lived and worked all their lives.

So, why Peter? Because as John concludes his gospel, he wants to make sure we understand how this glorious resurrection life gets lived out on the street by people like us, butchers and bakers and candlestick makers as well as by pastors and teachers and missionaries. We don't wait until we die to experience and participate in the resurrection life. And we start in our own neighborhood, with the people we have grown up with.