

## Has Easter Made Any Difference?

Hosea 11: 1-9 & John 21: 9-19

*Fourth Sunday of Easter/ 17<sup>th</sup> April 2005*

The Easter morning accounts of women at the empty tomb, Mary mistaking Jesus for the gardener, or the Easter evening meal in Emmaus with Jesus breaking bread – these are remarkable experiences. That’s why we sing “Alleluias!” and proclaim, “He is risen!” But equally remarkable, maybe (*maybe*) more so are all the *other* post-resurrection accounts. On Easter Jesus appears and then leaves. But in the days that follow Jesus actually spends time with his disciples – the very ones who betrayed and denied him.

We see this in John 21 as Peter and the others are trying to get their lives back to normal, back to the routine of smelly fish and nets and sun-baked skin. Peter is back at work, doing what he knows best – fishing. This is what we do after we experience loss and grief, isn’t it? We want our lives back to normal, back to the routine as if to mask or hide the fact that there is no such thing as ‘normal’ any more because someone is missing, something has changed. Or in Peter’s case, someone was lost and came back, then left and is now back again along the lakeshore. And he and the others are forced to try to figure out what it all means. Their heads must have been spinning! For what is *normalcy* after you’ve encountered resurrection in the flesh? What does normalcy look like after that? There’s no way to be prepared for such an event, to get used to it ahead of time. How can anything ever be the same again? How can we go back to our fishing, how can we just grow old and forget all that we experienced? Peter could not and neither can we.

It is remarkable, this scene in John of Jesus beside the Sea of Galilee, really remarkable. Come with me and imagine yourself there; imagine sitting along the shore with Jesus – the *resurrected* Jesus. He just helped you haul in one hundred and fifty-three large fish (I’m struck that John actually stopped to count them!), and you’re sitting there with fish and bread, Jesus – the *resurrected* Jesus cooking you breakfast. Amazing. You don’t mention anything about what happened in Jerusalem and neither does he, but you all know. You don’t ask him how or why. You are happy, just happy to be with him. There’s no question about his identity, you know who he is and you’re grateful just to be in his presence again. You strike up a

conversation and you talk casually around a charcoal fire with Jesus – the *resurrected* Jesus. That just amazes me.

What is the protocol for such a moment? How does one act in the presence of resurrection? I would be filled both with awe and fear, unease and wonder all at the same time. Joy and yet concern, concern because this is not ‘normal,’ something is not quite right, this is not the order of things, not natural, not life as we know it. And the more I spend in his presence, listening to him speak, slowly I begin to realize, gradually it dawns on me that my life is never going to be the same again; it can’t be, unless I deny my experience and give up all integrity for the sake of normalcy.

The more you sit with him and talk with him, the more you slowly realize something beyond resurrection is about to take place. You can feel it coming, gradually, slowly it begins to emerge and you realize there’s nothing you can do to stop it. Something will be required of me, the Holy is about to make a claim upon my life. I can’t be privy to resurrection without it making a profound difference in my life. The conversation turns from casual to formal – or shall we say, ultimate.

Jesus turns and says, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Simon Peter says, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” More than what or whom? It isn’t clear.

“These” could refer to the 153 fish – meaning do you love me just for the miracles, for the abundance, for what you get out of me? Is that why you love me, Peter?

“These” could refer to all the fishing gear assembled on the shore, left over from their morning expedition – meaning do you love me more than your work, your profession, the technology of your trade, your livelihood? Is that all you care about, Peter? Work? Do I mean more to you than your work, your busy-ness?

“These” could also refer to the other disciples looking on. Perhaps there’s no doubt about the other’s commitment to Jesus, but Peter has a special history with Jesus, but not because Peter is better. Jesus isn’t lifting Peter as a super-disciple, with special demands placed upon him and not on the others. This is not a text to elevate the supremacy of Peter (for Protestants, there is no such text). Peter is no different from Andrew or John

or Matthew or you or me. But Peter is the one who denied Jesus, publicly. Peter is the one who turned his back and his face on the one he promised to die for. Peter lost his integrity. Beside a charcoal fire, the night of Jesus' arrest he wounded his soul in an act of spiritual suicide, in the darkness he tried to hide, not once, not twice, but *three times* denying any association with Jesus and he went away bitterly weeping and shamed.

But now notice that we're sitting beside another *charcoal fire*, this time in the light of day, with a different public and three times Jesus asks the denier, "Do you love me?" Three times denied, three times affirmed. Jesus gives him the ability to face his shame and the opportunity to start again. It's striking that Jesus never mentions the earlier incident, but it must have been on everyone's mind, including Peter's. Jesus doesn't condemn or judge or shame him more. Jesus doesn't belittle him or deny Peter. Instead, Jesus cooks him breakfast (!) and shows Peter that he is worthy of divine care. *That's* the way of Yahweh, you can almost hear Jesus repeating what Yahweh said to Hosea, "for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. (Hosea 11:9)" "I will not come in wrath."

And this is when Peter grasps all that transpired is not the end of something, but the beginning of something new. The resurrection of Jesus does not simply bring a tragic story to a close with a happy ending, a spiritual fairy-tale where they all lived happily ever after. *The resurrection means we cannot go back to life as normal, but that our lives will witness change because the entire world is different.* The gospel is more than the good news that we are saved from sin or that guilt is taken away.<sup>1</sup> Once they are removed, then the true conversation between God and humanity can begin and we discover who we are and what we're supposed to do. This is when the change starts. Humans generally are leery of change, but as a Christian it's kind of difficult to resist change when we have at the heart of our experience resurrection – *you can't have more change than that!* Easter is not an end, but a new beginning. Something new, never before seen, has been witnessed in the world. Something new, the redeeming power of God, has been unleashed in the world in a novel way. And when followers of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. quotation from the worship bulletin: "The Christian gospel tells us not simply that we are saved from sin or that our guilt is taken away – it insists that we shall find out who we are and what we may be in an encounter, a relationship. All human identity is constructed through conversations, in one way and another." Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles our Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 138.

Jesus know this and when the Spirit of the Risen Christ is in our hearts we find ourselves being changed, along with the church that embodies the Risen Christ. It's as if Jesus is saying to Peter, now that he has encountered resurrection, "It is your job, Peter, to be true to what you know, be true to what you have experienced and know in your heart about the nature and purpose of God and follow me. There's still work to be done. I have only started. And I'm going to work and remain among you by living in you and through you, with you. Follow me. That's why I need you to affirm your love for me, for when you love me then you will love and care for my people, *all of them*. Then you'll do what I came to do. Follow me."

What we learn here is: *With every restoration there comes a commission*. We have the public restoration of Peter and with this comes his commission, his call, a summons – "*Follow me*."<sup>2</sup>

That's what happens when God encounters human life. Forgiveness, healing, restoration, salvation – choose whatever word you want. But this experience is rarely given just for you alone. There are consecrated consequences, holy implications. Do you think that when God gives you grace it stops with you? While we may be the apple of God's eye, cared for as if we were God's only child, the gospel is not about us. We discover that we are conduits of grace. Grace is given to us so that we can give grace. We receive blessing in order to become a blessing.

My friend, Lawson Brown, is a wonderful joke-teller. He has hundreds for every occasion. Over the years I have heard many of them, but I cannot recite one. He calls me a "dead-end" because he knows they won't go beyond me! I hope, at least, that I'm not that way with grace. What I have experienced and what you have experienced of God's love is not just for us, or the church, but for the church without walls, the wider world, for those who have never heard, have never known, cannot trust that God will come with resurrection love, instead of wrath.

I guess what I'm trying to say, what the text compels me to say, is that Easter is not an end, but a beginning. We can't say, "Well, now that's over." But my sense is sometimes this is what the church communicates unintentionally; it is as if the church, in celebrating Easter with its glorious

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<sup>2</sup> Cullen I. K. Story, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose, Patter, and Power*, Foreword by James E. Loder (Shippensburg, PA: Ragged Edge Press, 1997), p. 387.

triumph seems to say, “The End.” We think Jesus’ work is already done. No more to tell. Now we just have to convince people to *believe it*. Maybe this is why Pentecost is such a low-Sunday in the church, when the Spirit comes to equip the church for the *ongoing* work of Christ. Pentecost should be up there with Easter in its implication. Because, as Peter realized, the story isn’t over, the work isn’t finished. Action is required, not just belief. We cannot go on living the way we’ve been living. God’s power of love is unleashed in the world through us who follow Jesus. For Peter and the others, all of this had a profound impact upon their lives, revolutionary. As Jesus said to Peter, when you follow me and care for my people it will make great demands upon your life, and will bring you to a place you may not wish to go. But we are called to follow. The same is supposed to be true for us – and I believe it is and can be, because the same Jesus is at work in us.

Jesus was at work in the life of Sister Dorothy Stang (1931-2005), a nun in the order of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. You might have heard about her in the news. She was shot to death in the Amazon on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2005. The 73-year-old, Ohio-born sister lived in Brazil for almost forty years, working in the Pará state which is the heart of the Amazon’s brutal conflict over illegal logging, mahogany smuggling, and corrupt land deals. In seventeen years, more than 1,237 rural workers were murdered for getting in the way of the corruption. She ducked many bullets and taught the poor about forestry and how to care for creation as followers of Jesus. Being a disciple of Jesus led her there. Being a disciple cost her her life. She didn’t carry a gun. Holding up a Bible, she said, “This is my ammunition.” She was shot while reading scripture to farmers. She owned a T-shirt that read, “KEEP THE SONG ALIVE.” After her death the president of Brazil announced the creation of the reserves she backed and fought with her life to create.<sup>3</sup>

I was moved reading about her story this week in conjunction with this text. It is amazing what people will do and accomplish and experience because of Jesus. Not all of us are called to be a Sister Dorothy (some are). We don’t have to go to Brazil to make a difference (although some do). But whether it’s sitting in our dining rooms with family or in the heart of Africa, following Jesus places a claim upon our lives, a claim of love and care and concern. And when this claim is realized in our hearts we find that we are

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick Symmes, “In Memory of Sister Dorothy,” *Outside*, May 2005, p. 148.

changed people and changing the world – all because we're willing to follow. That's what matters.

“Follow me,” Jesus says.

“Walk with me,” Jesus says.

“Live with me. See the world with me.

Dream with me. Risk with me.

Love, care, forgive with me.

Restore with me.

Heal with me.

Die with me.

Share with me.

I'll be with you through it all.

Fear not.

I am with you and I will care for you.

And I hope you like fish for breakfast.”

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