

“Love Wins!”

Easter Sunday

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March 27, 2016

It had been a long journey, one that was actually much longer than the three year span of time since that first encounter on the beach at Galilee. It all began, of course, with a simple request: **“Put out into deep water,”** he had said. And I did as he had suggested, setting sail to the deeper waters of the lake. **“Cast your nets on the other side of the boat,”** he said. And, once again, I complied. The ensuing catch was so great that we needed an extra boat to bring it to shore. I was overwhelmed. **“Go away from me, Lord,”** I said, kneeling before him, **“for I am a sinful man.”**

“Do not be afraid, Peter,” he had said. **“From now on you will be catching people.”**

And that was where it all began. I chose in that moment to follow this man—to become a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. As I look back upon it now, I had no idea of what I was getting into, no real understanding of what I was taking on. All that I knew was that here was a man who somehow, knew me, who somehow, understood me and loved me for who I was and I wanted to share in the life that he was living. It was a life, of course, spent on the move, traveling from village to village, with Jesus teaching in parables and stories, painting a picture of what the kingdom of God is like.

It was hardly the life that I had anticipated. Yet, it was a life that I would not have traded for anything in the world. To be sure, the learning curve was steep and I often found myself struggling to grasp what Jesus was saying. Your scriptures are filled with the stories that would suggest that I was a slow learner—one who was only too eager to forge ahead, often without waiting to listen or think too deeply.

I remember that we were on the road with Jesus, heading for Caesarea Philippi, when he asked us who people were saying that he was. **“Some say, John the Baptist,”** one of the other disciples said. **“Others say that you are Elijah.”** We walked on and then he stopped and turned to look at his directly. “What about you,” he said, “who do you say that I am?”

The silence was disturbed only by a nervous shuffling of feet. Not one of us would dare to meet his gaze. Instead, we studied the patterns of pebbles that lay in the roadway. Finally, when the silence became unbearable, I raised my head, looked him in the eye and said, **“You are the Messiah, you are the Christ!”**

It was the first time anyone of us had dared to give voice to what we were all thinking. And, in that sense, it was a relief to simply to say it. Yet, before I could experience the full effect of that relief, Jesus began to explain to us just what this affirmation actually meant. It meant, he said, that he would need to suffer persecution and death at the hands of the religious authorities before rising from the dead.

I didn't follow. It didn't make sense. How could it be that the Messiah would suffer such a fate? When I told him this—bluntly and boldly as was my practice—he sharply cut me off, telling me that I didn't know what I was talking about, that this was all according to God's divine wisdom—not human wisdom. I was stunned, of course, and didn't understand at all. It would be a long time before I did.

There were, of course, many other points of learning along the path that I would take as a follower of this extraordinary man. I would learn, for example, that love is not something that can be measured or calculated, that forgiveness is not something to be offered according to a narrow interpretation of the law. We were talking about the nature of forgiveness of meaning one day when I asked a question, but then added my own rather generous answer—or so I thought. "How many times should I forgive?" I asked. "Seven times?" The law required that I forgive three times and I thought that by more than doubling that number, I was being extremely generous.

Jesus looked at me and sadly shook his head, "No Peter," he said. "Not seven times, but seventy times seven!" Once again, I was stunned. Seventy times seven? Forgiveness without limits? It just didn't make sense.

So, you can see, that I was hardly a model student. The message of Jesus was so radically different from anything that I had ever heard that it seems that I spent most of my time trying to grasp the essence of what he was saying. More often than I would care to admit, that message eluded me all together.

That much is apparent when you read your gospel accounts of the last week with Jesus—the week you refer to as "Holy Week." I remember that Jerusalem was a city "on edge" as we made our Passover pilgrimage through the great gates. There was tension everywhere and rumors upon rumors of what was about to take place.

I can't say, therefore, that I was surprised by the actual turn of events. I can't say that I was shocked by the arrest of Jesus in the garden or the trial that followed. But I can say that I was completely unprepared for my own reaction to it all. I had, after all, drawn a sword in the garden, prepared in that moment to fight to the death for the man that I had promised to be loyal to. I felt a bit foolish when Jesus told me to put away my sword. Once again, I just didn't understand.

And then, of course, the next sequence of events would become, for me, the darkest night of the soul that I could possibly imagine. Not once, or even twice, but three times I denied that I even knew Jesus to those accusers who suggested otherwise. Three times. Only hours before, I had promised that I would never leave his side.

I was beyond consolation. There was nothing that could be said that would take away the shame and the pain that I felt. The trial that followed, of course, was a mockery of justice and the drama of the crucifixion was more than I could bear. I wept...and then wept some more. There was no end to my tears. Even now, words cannot describe the absolute

despair that I felt. As far as I was concerned, my life had already ended. I could be numbered among the living dead.

But that, of course, would not be the end of my story. By the grace and power of God, it would be but a painful prelude to a new chapter of life and living. You have come to this place this morning to celebrate the drama that unfolded around an empty tomb. You have listened, once again, to those familiar words that describe my reaction to the news of Mary Magdalene that the tomb was empty.

There was the foot race to the tomb—one that I lost rather decisively, I'm afraid. And then we discovered that it was as Mary Magdalene had suggested. The stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty.

At that point, I didn't know what to believe or what to hope for. It would be later, of course, that we would receive further word from Mary Magdalene of her encounter with our risen Lord. And then, we ourselves—the other disciples—would experience his living presence.

It was a time unlike any that could be imagined. My journey with Jesus had taken me from the heights to the depths and then back to a new and greater height. I was, as you might imagine, emotionally exhausted. I needed a break and decided to go fishing. Some of the other disciples liked the idea and so we returned to the Sea of Galilee and the life that we had once known. It was good to fish together again—a bit like old times. The fishing, however, was not good. We fished all night and caught absolutely nothing.

But then there was this stranger on the shore who called out to us and told us to try casting on the other side of the boat. We did as was suggested. After all, we had nothing to lose. As soon as our nets settled down into the blue-green water, they started churn with silver sides of fish. In no time, our nets were bulging to the point of breaking.

It was then that someone called out that the stranger on the shore was, in fact, no stranger. It was none other than Jesus himself. You know me, I didn't want to wait around for the fish laden boat to make it to shore. I didn't hesitate, but dove into the water and swam the short distance to shore. There was, you see, a conversation that I wanted to have—one that couldn't wait any longer.

It was after breakfast that all of us shared together with Jesus on the beach that we actually had that long awaited conversation. It was one that I will never forget. You see, I had not forgiven myself for the fact that, on three separate occasions, I had denied that I even knew this man. That memory hung over me like a weight that threatened to crush me. Jesus, of course, understood that and so it was that he asked me on three separate occasions if I loved him. Three times he asked, "Peter, do you love me?" And three times I responded by affirming my love: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!"

After each of my affirmations, he then commissioned me: Feed my lambs, he said. "Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep" It was, of course, his way of letting me know that my past

would not be held against me, that I was forgiven and that I was free to live a new life, one that would continue with the work that he had already begun. “Follow me,” he said.

I, of course, had heard the words before—three years before on that same beach. I had known so little then, but now, it was as if I could see and hear in ways that I never could before. Now, it was as if I somehow understood the meaning of the love that Jesus had lived for and died for. Now, there was nothing that I wanted more than the opportunity to continue with the work that he had begun. And, if you know my story, you know that, in fact, that is precisely what I would do.

As a postscript to my story, I would like to take but a moment to suggest that, perhaps, there are places where you can identify with my own experience of faith—or lack thereof. It is, of course, true that the context of your life is far different from my own. And yet, it is also true, that we share the common story of our humanity and its experience of both fear and hope, of brokenness and faith.

I was, you see, hardly a model disciple. I was too brash, too headstrong, too inclined to go off in one direction, certain that I had the answer—only to find out later that I was wrong. Time and again, it was Jesus who would gently remind me that there was another way of looking at things—not from a human point of view, but from God’s point of view.

I didn’t want to accept the idea that the Messiah should suffer and die.

I didn’t want to believe that forgiveness could be limitless.

I didn’t understand that at the heart of the “good news” that Jesus brought into the world was the simple conviction that love was stronger than death, that it was more powerful than hate, that it was greater than the sword. That was difficult for me to believe.

I suspect that, given the context of your contemporary world, it may also be difficult for you to believe. In a time where terrorist bombs and bullets have the whole world on edge, it may be difficult to believe that love can make any difference at all. In a time where cultural prejudice and racial animosity threatens to spin out of control, it may be hard to believe that there is any merit in building bridges rather than walls. In a time in which the forces of greed and self-centeredness seems to be fully in control, it may seem like foolishness to suggest that there is another way to live.

And yet, that is precisely the message that I would like to leave with you this morning—surprising as it may be. For, if there is one thing that I learned in my journey with Jesus, it was this: I learned that, ultimately, love wins.

To be sure, it does not always seem like it-- especially when the forces of darkness and death threaten...especially when the feeling of fear is so tangible...especially when it appears that evil has triumphed. Believe me, I know those feelings only too well.

But I also know that the stone was rolled away and that the tomb was empty...that there was a stranger on the beach who called us to cast our nets yet again. I know that there was

a breakfast communion and a forgiving conversation that would change my life forever. And I know that at the very center of it all was love—a love so great that the grave could not contain it, a love so powerful that my past could not deny it...a love that not only changed me, but changed our world as well. There are, of course, many ways of communicating the essential meaning of the Easter story. But there is, in my opinion, none more succinct or more powerful than this: Love wins because Christ is risen! Amen.