

Sermon

“The Resurrection Means ...”

May 12th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

4th Sunday of Easter

Based on Psalm 30 and John 21:1-19

SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 30

¹ I exalt you, Lord, because you pulled me up; you didn't let my enemies celebrate over me. ² Lord, my God, I cried out to you for help, and you healed me. ³ Lord, you brought me up from the grave, brought me back to life from among those going down to the pit. ⁴ You who are faithful to the Lord, sing praises to him; give thanks to his holy name! ⁵ His anger lasts for only a second, but his favor lasts a lifetime. Weeping may stay all night, but by morning, joy! ⁶ When I was comfortable, I said, “I will never stumble.” ⁷ Because it pleased you, Lord, you made me a strong mountain. But then you hid your presence. I was terrified. ⁸ I cried out to you, Lord. I begged my Lord for mercy: ⁹ “What is to be gained by my spilled blood, by my going down into the pit? Does dust thank you? Does it proclaim your faithfulness? ¹⁰ Lord, listen and have mercy on me! Lord, be my helper!” ¹¹ You changed my mourning into dancing. You took off my funeral clothes and dressed me up in joy ¹² so that my whole being might sing praises to you and never stop. Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever. [*Common English Bible*]

John 21:1-19

¹ Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two other disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter told them, “I'm going fishing.” They said, “We'll go with you.” They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing. ⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't realize it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus called to them, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶ He said, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net. ⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It's the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they weren't far from shore, only about one hundred yards. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you've just caught.” ¹¹ Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn't torn, even with so many fish. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have

breakfast.” None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He 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.

¹⁵ When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Simon replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ Jesus asked a second time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Simon replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Take care of my sheep.” ¹⁷ He asked a third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, “Do you love me?” He replied, “Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ I assure you that when you were younger you tied your own belt and walked around wherever you wanted. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will tie your belt and lead you where you don’t want to go.” ¹⁹ He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, “Follow me.” [*Common English Bible*]

OPENING PRAYER: Guide us, O God, by your Word and your Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace and purpose, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray; and let all God’s people say...Amen.

Starting with a Postscript

With last week being Youth Sunday, I’ve had some extra time to think about this week’s sermon ... so I decided that I would begin with a piece of Bible trivia you might possibly find interesting: Our gospel reading today is from the final chapter of John, but did you know that chapter 21 is actually an extra, added chapter? That’s right—it’s more truly an epilogue. It’s a postscript. It’s as if someone else came along some time after the original author was finished writing the first 20 chapters, picked up a pen, and decided to fill in juuuuust a few more details ... and so they wrote one more chapter. And, thanks be to God that they did!

Because while the first 20 chapters of John tell us all about Jesus’ life, death, and initial resurrection events, chapter 21 goes to great length to move believers *and* doubters alike, away from seeing Jesus’ resurrection as mere magic or sleight of hand, to understanding the event as historical fact. Truly, chapter 21

demonstrates for all time the reality of the resurrection and that it's no lie or half-truth. Because if you stop reading after only chapter 20, skeptics can easily and annoyingly argue that the resurrection stories about people seeing Jesus are simply visions or hallucinations, or that Jesus is some sort of an apparition or a ghost. Thankfully, chapter 21 gives us the *details*—real details from real events about real people—details, I believe, that demonstrate the truth of the resurrection and what it means that the risen Christ was absolutely real.

The Game of “Telephone”

Now, have you ever heard of, or played, the game “Telephone”? It's a fun way to watch and see how a simple phrase or sentence can start and finish as two completely different things. Basically, you sit or stand in a circle or line, and beginning with the leader whispering a phrase to the first person, the phrase is quietly passed from one person to another until it reaches the last person. Errors typically accumulate in the retellings and without fail, by the time it reaches the last person, the phrase or sentence no longer matches the original version. It can be a silly and amusing game, but it powerfully illustrates how even simple words get lost or changed in the translation and retelling from one person to another, whether on purpose or by accident.

This simple game is an example of how larger, more complicated stories transform in *their* retellings, which I believe helps explain how our four gospels can have slightly different versions of the same stories about Jesus. Now, when it comes to John's gospel, biblical scholars differ on exactly when it was written, but they agree that it was completed anywhere from 25-50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. No fewer than 25 years—that's almost a generation and that's a long time for people to tell and retell stories of actual events before someone finally wrote them down, even *if* it was the eyewitness who finally did so years later.

The Fascinating Details

And, that is exactly why today's passage from chapter 21 is so extraordinary because the finer details were not ever lost in all those years of telling and retelling! Here's what I mean, consider all these fascinating details: there's a

listing of seven disciples, most by name. There is memory about time—that it was nighttime when they got into the boat and just after daybreak when they first spot Jesus on the shore. There is memory of dialogue among the disciples, and there is also dialogue with Jesus himself, both from shouting distance and face-to-face. There is Jesus spotting a school of fish in the water and pointing it out to the men. There is Simon Peter, *known* for his impulsive actions, not jumping into the water right away at all, but instead waiting until *after* he had properly clothed himself (I've stopped trying to figure out some of the details about that part 😞). There is memory of how far from shore they were—about 100 yards off it says. There is memory of the charcoal fire with fish on it *and* that bread was there, too. And, finally, there is Jesus asking for more fish from the recent catch to cook over the fire, and the recollection of precisely how many fish were caught in the untorn net—exactly 153 were apparently counted and recorded—what a detail to remember! Then Jesus invited them to sit down for breakfast, and we are told this was the third time Jesus had appeared to them. Again, these resurrection details are a powerful testimony to the actuality of our risen Lord, and I wholeheartedly believe they are our way of knowing that it certainly must be true.

We Are Easter People

But, what does it all mean and why does it all matter? Well, first of all, it means that details do matter. It also means that new life and new chances are always possible. It means that everything after the empty tomb was different and nothing has ever been the same again.

For the disciples, that meant the fulfilling of the psalmist's poetic words—their mourning was changed into dancing, their funeral clothes were taken off and they were dressed up in joy, and their whole being began singing praises to the risen Lord—and it never ... ever ... stopped. Because they were an Easter people! All of us are an Easter people—us and the disciples and believers of every time and place—we are resurrection people through and through. And, that means that because of the resurrection, life has been turned upside down and inside out—that because of the resurrection, Easter is far more than just one Sunday or one day a year. It's more than one "Holy Week." And, it's much, much more

than just another season on the annual church calendar where we turn paraments and stoles from purple to white until we get to Pentecost red.

Being an Easter people—being a resurrection people—means having a recognition of the following kinds of details ... that God is in charge instead of us, that crucifixion was not the final word, that a shattered body can rise again, that God always works to bring good things out of bad situations, and that we are changed and transformed and given new life and new chances to accomplish God's will in a weary world each and every day. Beginning with the original disciples, people were indeed transformed—followers became leaders, listeners became preachers, converts became missionaries, persecutors became role models, the healed became healers, and nothing was ever the same again. Because of the resurrection, it means that grace is abundant and overflowing, and new life and new chances are indeed possible.

Simon Peter is Our Shining Example

And, who better to embody such a change, such a transformation, made possible because of the risen Christ, than Simon Peter, the “Rock”? Talk about getting a new lease on life and having new chances to fulfill his God-given potential! Before the resurrection, Peter made a habit out of sticking his foot in his mouth almost every single time he opened it. He was outspoken but not eloquent. He was known by Jesus and his friends for his ill-considered bravado and brash contradictions. He was impulsive and insecure, slow and dimwitted, and at times he lacked all understanding of what Jesus was trying to say and teach. He fell asleep in Gethsemane when all Jesus wanted him to do was stay awake. And, then he denied knowing Jesus three times during Jesus' ordeal with the Jewish authorities. All in all, in the gospels, Peter was flawed in character while maintaining the best of intentions.

Then the resurrection happened, and *everything* changed for Peter! After the resurrection, Jesus asked Peter to publicly confess his love three times, rehabilitating him from the three denials he earlier committed, and transforming him into a remarkable resurrection role model. Peter became a flexible, dynamic leader. The one who denied Jesus became the one who proclaimed Jesus the

boldest. He became a premier apostle and leader of the early church known for powerful preaching and miraculous powers. The apostle Paul even acknowledged Peter as one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church. And, while he was definitely not perfect, and remained very human in his decision-making, because of the resurrection he truly became the “rock” upon which the church was built. Truly, *his* mourning was changed into dancing, his funeral clothes were taken off and he was dressed up in joy, and Peter’s whole being began singing praises to the risen Lord ... and he never, ever stopped.

The Resurrection Means ...

Now, no one under God and heaven expects any one of us to turn out like Peter, but considering examples like Peter and so many more, the resurrection means that the details do matter for each of us. It means that new life and new chances are always possible, no matter who we are or what we have done. It means that everything after the empty tomb was different and nothing has ever been the same again. And, so the resurrection also means that the future can be different from the past. It means we are not defined by our mistakes, nor are we defined by the worst thing we have ever done.

Friends, because of the resurrection, we are an Easter people, called once again to love our God and our neighbors as ourselves. Because of the resurrection, we are empowered by God’s abundant and overflowing grace to tend the sheep and feed the lambs. And, because of the resurrection, the psalmist’s words ring loud and true—*our* mourning has been changed into dancing, our funeral clothes have been taken off and now we are dressed up in joy, and our whole beings may sing praises to the risen Lord ... and it must never, ever stop. None of the loving and tending and feeding and dancing and praising and being joyful and changing the world in God’s name can ever, ever stop. We can’t ever stop being an Easter people. Because for the sake of the world that God has created, the future must be better than the past. And, taking this resurrection thing seriously and living like it actually happened is the only way for that to become true.

Thanks be to God for the risen Christ. Amen.