

Sticking To Your Story

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This morning we begin a sermon series that we're calling "Close Encounters of the Resurrection Kind" and we are going to examine the lives of the people who the New Testament tells us had encounters with the Risen Christ. And we are going to wonder about the difference such encounters made? Last Sunday we talked about the gift of the resurrection and what we do with it – do we try to size the resurrection down to size so that it fits into our present life of comings and goings and schedules and deadlines? Or do we allow our lives to expand to encompass the resurrection? The New Testament Easter characters were characters whose lives took on a different proportion in the wake of the resurrection. Something took place inside of them such that their souls, their courage, their love, their grace grew to encompass not only the risen Christ, but the world for whom Christ had died.

Today we are looking at the person of Peter – Simon Peter –and we are looking again at a story we talked about just a few weeks ago – the story of the disciples fishing after the resurrection and encountering the risen Jesus on the shore. **John 21:1-19**

Undoubtedly you heard the story of the four college sophomores who instead of spending the weekend studying for their American history final decided to go on a little ski weekend in the mountains. Upon their return and realizing they were not at all prepared to take their final they went to the professor and told him that the night before they had gotten a flat tire and the time that it took to get it fixed kept them from studying for the test and would it be possible to take the test the next

day so they could have time to study. The professor thought about it for a moment and then graciously said that he understood and sure they could take the test the next day. The next day the four students arrived and the professor sat them in the four corners of the room. He gave them the test that came in two parts – two questions. On the first page was the first question worth 5 points – Who was the first American president? Wow, they thought, this test is going to be pretty easy. They turned to the second page and read the second question: Which tire?

Perhaps the most important thing in sticking to your story – is knowing your story to begin with.

So the story (as John tells it) begins with a few men fishing. I am not a fisherman. I have fished a few times in my life, but I have no fish stories. In fact the only fish stories I have are “no fish” stories. So I can very much relate to our friends that we read about this morning. A subset of the disciples have gone out onto the Sea of Galilee and they are doing some night fishing and they are having no luck. They are catching nothing. Dragging their nets, but the fish are smarter than them. Now as the story goes the sun begins to rise they look to the shore and they see the figure of a man. And the man directs them to cast their nets to the other side of the boat. So maybe to humor the man more than anything else, they throw their nets to the other side and they catch almost more than they can handle. Now the story is getting interesting. Something is up here. And it is this something that helps them to recognize Jesus. So they go paddling to shore and when they get there they bring their catch of fish – a catch, mind you, that Jesus had directed them to – and there Jesus is cooking breakfast -- loaves and fish. And of course the loaves and the fish are a part of their story. The feeding of the 5000. This is their story together. Remember the loaves and the fish, Jesus says. Remember which tire was flat. But now, as the story continues, Jesus invites them to bring some of the fish they had caught. Isn't it interesting how Jesus – knowing that without him they wouldn't have caught a blessed thing – dignifies their participation, honors their part in the story and says, “Bring some of the fish you caught.” He invites them to freely give what he had helped them to procure. Now hopefully the irony has not been lost on these disciples, “Bring some of the fish you caught.” Jesus brings them along into the story. And down to breakfast they sit.

So after this breakfast of bread and fish, this communal meal – this collective moment -- the resurrected Jesus pulls Peter aside for a little conversation. It's a one on one conversation. You see, at some point the encounter with the resurrected Christ becomes an individual one. It moves from a collective story to an individual story. Last week on Easter Sunday we had a group encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Together with 3000 of our closest friends we gathered at the empty tomb and we rejoiced that he is not here, he is risen. We came en masse and we left en masse. But there comes a time when the resurrected Jesus pulls us from the body of believers and asks for a one on one. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* said, "Through the call of Jesus (people) become individuals ... It is no choice of their own that makes them individuals: it is Christ who makes them individuals by calling them." So Jesus makes Peter an individual by pulling him aside and having what turns out to be a hard conversation.

Now the truth is you and I don't like the thought of having a hard conversation with Jesus. Frankly, a hard conversation with Jesus is something most of us avoid at whatever cost. We kind of don't want the conversation be about us.. If there is any conversation we like to have with Jesus it's usually a conversation about someone else. You know what I mean. I'm guessing that about 90% of the pastoral conversations I have with people are about someone else. People want to talk to me about this person and that person – their spouse, this group of people, that group of people, their children, their friends. It's not an uncommon remark for a preacher to hear from someone going out the door – "Nice sermon, pastor, I just wish my husband was here to hear it, or my daughter was here to hear it, or my boss was here to hear it." We so much want the subject to be about someone else. When it comes to stories we would like the story to be about them.

One of the great lessons I learned from my friend C.S. Lewis – is that the only person's story that you are ever going to have any chance of understanding is your own. And even our own story is pretty complicated. There are still so many things I don't understand about myself and I have been living with myself for 55 years. If you got you figured out, when then you are one of the great

exceptions to the human race. And yet how often I want to turn the conversation with Jesus to it being about someone else! About how good or how bad someone else is! And yet writes C.S. Lewis:

What can you ever really know of other people's souls – of their temptations, their opportunities, their struggles? One soul in the whole creation you do know: and it is the only one whose fate is placed in your hands. If there is a God, you are, in a sense, alone with Him. You cannot put him off with speculations about your next door neighbors or memories of what you have read in books. What will all that chat and hearsay count (will you even be able to remember it?) when the anesthetic fog which we call "nature" or "the real world" fades away and the Presence in which you have always stood become palpable, immediate, and unavoidable?

So for Peter there came the time when the resurrected Jesus pulled him aside and he had what we might call the first, "Come to Jesus meeting." And the first come to Jesus meeting begins with a question. And the question is, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Now lots of scholars have lots of opinions about who Jesus is talking about when it comes "these"? Do you love me more than "these"? I tend to think that Jesus is talking about the fish. Simon, son of John, do you love me more than those fish you were just trying to catch? In other words, Simon, son of John, -- it's a new day. All night you were back in the old life of trying to catch fish and make a living and do whatever it is you'd like to do – you walked away from Easter and tried to fit the resurrection into your old life and you were on your way to forgetting your story. So now the question is, "Do you love me more than these? Do you understand that the resurrection life is an invitation into a new chapter in which you get to put your life up against the calling of God? "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Then, Jesus says, I have a new work for you – Tend my sheep. Change of job description: Fisherman to shepherd. The resurrected life is expanding in you, Peter ... and now I am inviting you into a new work. Tend my sheep. I am the good shepherd, so I invite you now into this work with me – tend my sheep. And now all of a sudden our friend Peter has some soul searching to do. He has to remember the story. He has to decide whether he is going to continue in the story. Take care of my people,

Jesus says. I am leaving you this responsibility – take care of my people. And now he has to tend to his own story. What is the next thing God is calling me to be? This ever expanding life of resurrection.

But then the question comes again – Simon, son of John, do you love me? Whoa, whoa, whoa – I thought I just answered that question. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs,” Jesus says. As if to remind Peter that the new life is not simply about getting an answer right. Love is an easy word to throw around. “Do you love me?” he asks not just for a second time but for a third time and by the third time Peter takes a little umbrage. Hey, I answered the question didn’t I? Isn’t that enough? And Jesus says, “We’ll see if it is enough – because the resurrection life is more than just showing up on the beach and seeing Jesus and saying, “He is risen!” The resurrected life is the joy and the challenge of expansion whereby we live into the new job description.

And that’s what we see, isn’t it? The remaining pages of the New Testament are this journey with Peter as he tries to live into the new job description. And he had no idea how big it was going to be – but with each and every step we see Peter taking responsibility for the resurrected life.

He takes responsibility for picking new church leadership.

He takes responsibility to interpret to the people what in heaven’s name had just happened to them at Pentecost.

He takes responsibility to preach the good news of resurrection to a crowd that had every potential to be as against him as for him.

He takes responsibility for the lame man outside the temple – “Silver and gold have I none, but I give you what I have, in the name of Jesus Christ stand up and walk.”

He takes responsibility for the vision that came that maybe, just maybe, the gospel wasn't just for the Jews. Maybe, just maybe, God is bigger than that. Maybe the dream is that all people will be included in the grace of God – and maybe it's my job to make that happen.

It's amazing what happens when Jesus pulls you out of a crowd and says, "What's your story?" Enough talk about lilies and bunnies and Easter eggs, now it is the will of God for you and me to have a hard conversation. A come to Jesus meeting. A time when you get to wonder about the expanding life of resurrection within you. Now's the time to consider a change of job description. Have you considered that recently? Have you wondered in what new way you are going to take responsibility for the resurrected life? Or are you, to borrow the phrase from last week, are you already starting to whittle away this resurrected life so that it can fit into what you've always been doing? Are you just going to go back fishing? Forgetting about the loaves and fish and empty tomb? Will there be any evidence to convict you that you, you too, were a witness to the resurrection?

You might at first see no evidence of such of such witness if writer Anne Lamott were to walk into this room. She doesn't look like most of us – her dreadlocks would stand out. She doesn't talk like most of us – her language, shall we say, is a little earthy. Her faith may not necessarily fit comfortably into our framework of orthodoxy. But one thing she's thought a lot about is her story. And her story is a pretty dark one. Raised by a mother she came to detest. Consumed by a bitterness that led to abusive uses of people and drugs and alcohol. Despair that she masked with cynicism. But all that led mysteriously to an encounter with the living God who claimed her and set her on a new and different path. One that has taken her far away from the old life, and yet one that still might raise questions for you and me. But that's not the point, is it? It's not for us to be worrying about her story. We've got our own story to worry about. We have our own journey to take from the empty tomb. And as sister Lamott writes, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace--only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

The mystery of grace – that meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us.

Do you love me? The question asked by the one who meets us where we are – perhaps with every hope to go back to the way life used to be. With every temptation to whittle down the resurrected life into something quaint and manageable. Do you love me? he asks. Over and over he asks. Yes, Lord, you know I love you. And with grace he won't leave it at that. "Tend my sheep," he says. Over and over and over again, "Tend my sheep."

For this grace meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us.