

# A Word from the Apostle John

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It is an honor to be with you here at Church of the Palms – and to be given the chance to speak about my “close encounter of the resurrection kind”.

You will have to pardon my appearance – but the truth is once a fisherman, always a fisherman – and I’ve never worn a coat and tie in my life, it was all they could do to get me in this collared shirt. The big, black robe with blue stripes was out of the question. You don’t need a black robe or coat and tie to tell you story – and telling my story is what I’ve been asked to do. It’s really what any of us is asked to do – just tell your story about your encounter with the living God.

Well as many of you know the story began for me up alongside the shores of the Sea of Tiberias – at least that’s what some of us called it – I think you most know it by Galilee –the Sea of Galilee. It’s where I grew up with my brother James, father Zebedee and our mother. Poor mom never got named in the New Testament – that’s just not the way they did things back then – but a good Jewish boy becomes a good Jewish boy largely because of his good Jewish mother. And on this mother’s day we can’t forget our moms. She’s a part of my story as is another mother, but that comes later.

“Sons of Thunder” they called us, James, my brother, and I. Sons of Thunder. Truth is we had a little thunder in us. Not much lightning, but a little thunder. We weren’t afraid to speak up. We

learned that from mom. "Speak up," she'd say. And we spoke up. Like that time when that Samaritan village wouldn't accept us, and we spoke up and said "Do you want us to call down fire from Heaven?" we asked Jesus. Well, as if we really could. Well, lots of thunder but not much lightning. And then there was that time when good old mom got Jesus and us aside and asked about the seating chart in heaven. "Any chance," she said, "we could we could get these two boys sitting next to you, Jesus?" Good old mom. First helicopter parent. But of course she, nor we, had any idea what we were asking. Great seats ... but can you pay the price? he asked. Can you drink the cup, I drink? Can you be baptized with my baptism? We had no idea what we were asking – we Sons of Thunder and good old mom.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

So there we were in training with our father in the family business – learning how to be fishermen. Tending our nets. Minding, as it were, our own business. We had been to the local synagogue to hear the rabbi from Nazareth. We had been aware of his teaching. We were struck by his message. But never had we considered becoming students of a rabbi – no one ever accused us of being students. We were fisherman. Tradesmen. We were busily making a living. It never really occurred to us that the rabbinical life, this becoming a disciple of a particular rabbi – was something that was possible.

But then came the day when the rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus—stopped by the boats, saw us mending our nets – and then popped the question. Not really a question – rather an invitation: "Follow me.," he said, "I'll teach you to fish for people." Of course we knew what he meant. We had heard his repeated interpretation of the law – boiling it down always to love God, love neighbor. Love God, love neighbor. He wanted to teach us about loving neighbor. He wanted to show us how to walk the walk. But to walk the walk meant, first of all, a choice. To walk the walk meant walking away. Walking away from the boats. It's all we ever knew. It was the family plan. But there comes a

time when a young man or a young woman has to decide—what am I going to be. I remembered when Jesus told the story about the two boys and the father. Two boys and a father – and there came the time for the young boy to decide what was he going to be and he had to leave the father to do so. You can't blame him for that. Man's got to do, what a man's got to do. So we looked at father, we looked at ourselves, and we looked at the rabbi – and we left. We followed. We became students. Sometimes that's just the way life has to be – you just have to leave something behind. You won't embrace what's ahead of you if you don't leave what is behind you.

So we left and we traveled with the rabbi. For three years we traveled. A lot happens in three year. Lots of stories. Too many, and you Presbyterians get nervous if the preacher goes past 20 minutes. I prefer the Pentecostals – they let you go for 2 hours. Of course, I did write a book – you may heard about it – the Gospel of John. Actually, I didn't write it myself – it's more from the community of people that knew me and heard my stories. And there were many – feeding 5000, storms on the sea, blind men seeing, lepers cleansed, dead men raised, live men walking on water— on and on it goes. Lots of people can tell lots of those stories. But there's just a few stories that only a few of us can tell.

You see, somehow and for some reason, brother James and I and Peter – never quite sure why Peter's brother, Andrew, never got included— brother James and I and Peter -- somehow and for some reason were invited by the rabbi to join him – sort of this inner circle – to join him as he would sometimes go apart. Sometimes Jesus would go apart. And sometimes Jesus would take us. The first was on top of a mountain where we stood with Jesus as he entered into glorious communion with the great prophets, Moses and Elijah and to hear the voice of heaven give his blessing upon the rabbi. It was an indescribable experience –perhaps not unlike moments of epiphany that you have had along the way. Encounters with the divine that you just can't explain or describe. Jesus took us to this mountaintop experience and showed us a little of what it meant to be a follower. You get these moments of glory. Moments of communion. Moments of heavenly bliss. You just don't want those moments to end. But they do. Life isn't always about mountaintops because the next place

he took the three of us was to the place of death – to that little hovel where that little family was grieving over that little girl. She had died just a little before. He took us into that hopeless place – the place where all had given up. “No use,” they said. “Lost cause.” But as if he didn’t hear he spoke. He spoke into the hopeless moment a word of healing. A word of healing. They laughed at him, you know. For speaking the healing word. They laughed. Said this was no place for healing. The poor girl’s dead, they said. But he spoke nonetheless: “Little girl,” he said, “rise.” Little girl, rise. And she rose. Sometimes a man’s got to do what a man’s got to do. Sometimes you must speak the word of healing in the midst of the shaming and hopeless laughter.

And, of course, it was the same three of us whom Jesus took apart with him into the recesses of the garden – the Garden of Gethsemane – where Jesus descended into the valley – the valley of pain, the dark night of the soul. From the mountain of glory and blessing and communion, to the bedside of death and resurrection and then to the valley. And from a distance as we drifted off to sleep we heard this same man – the glorified one, the healing one -- this same man begging for mercy and for a chance to be spared the pain. Life is that way sometimes. Pretty tenuous. Pretty fragile. One day you’re on top of the mountain, one day they are applauding your feat of healing, the next day you’re at the bottom. You know that. One day you’re promoted, the next day you’re fired. One day you think you’ve got a thousand friends, the next day there’s no one around. One day you’re wise, the next day you’re a fool. It’s a fickle crowd this race we call human. Was this the cup he was to drink? Was this the baptism? “Follow me,” he said, “and I’ll make you fish for people.” And our response was, “Hey Jesus, can we sit at your right and your left?” Sometimes you don’t know what you’re asking. We never really understood what it meant to follow.

And so it was, as my beloved community would want to tell you, that I followed – followed him all the way to that disgusting place called Golgotha—the place of the skull. The place where they took the two bit criminals to be executed Roman style. I followed – maybe more out of curiosity than anything else – I followed and watched as they took the rabbi, stripped him down to his skivvies, nailed him to the beams like drywall and hoisted him up for the world to see. The world – including

for God's sake his own mother. His own mother. No mother should ever have to see something like that done to her son. But she saw it all right. And there I stood with her and heard him say – in between his gasps for air – I heard him say – “Son, behold your mother.” I suppose I could have made it look like I didn't hear it – because you know if you didn't hear it, well then it's not your responsibility. But I heard it and what the rabbi was giving me in the last moments of his life was a new way to follow. He was giving me a new responsibility. Responsibility for his mother. Responsibility for another human being. While he – the Lamb of God – was taking responsibility for the human race – the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – he was inviting me to take responsibility for one of the sheep. Son, behold your mother. Good Friday had become for me Mothers Day. To follow is to take responsibility. All mothers become your mother. Religion that is pure and undefiled, says another one of my fellow apostles, is to care for widows and orphans. All widows become your widow; all orphans become your orphan. Son, behold you mother.

And I guess that's why I asked to have read this morning that story that brother Luke wrote about Peter and me coming out of the temple not long after Pentecost and there we found that man who was lame and begging for money. Now this was not the only lame beggar you are going to find outside the temple. Truth is anytime you go walking into the temple you are going to find someone down on their luck and in need of a little help. Truth is I've passed by a hundred of them. Truth is you have too. But on this day there he was this person. He was a person. A flesh and blood person. A neighbor. Sprawled in front of us and in his spawledness there came this voice to us – Peter and me. And it was the voice of the rabbi – little girl, rise. Time to take responsibility. Behold, your neighbor. Speak the word of healing.

Oh they may laugh. They may say he's hopeless. But speak the word of healing. And before we knew it out of Peter's mouth came the words: “ In the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk.” And as they laughed, we pulled up the lame man and he was able to walk. We spoke into the pain and the paralysis and someone new stood forth. And it got people's attention. And it got people worried. And it got people nervous. And it got the religious people concerned that we were starting

to cause trouble and that we were starting to spread rumors that the rabbi was alive. We were starting to get up false hopes that maybe God had a healing word. That maybe the resurrected and ascended Jesus was still at work in the world. Like I said, the religious people didn't like it because for them there were the bad people and the good people and healing was beside the point. Responsibility was beside the point. Behold your neighbor was beside the point. The lame begging man was there because it was his fault – that's what they wanted to say. But when you have a close encounter of the resurrection kind – all mothers become your mothers. All widows become your widows. All orphans become your orphans. All neighbors become your neighbors. But that doesn't mean that everyone is going to like it. Hard to believe that helping a lame man walk can get you thrown into prison – but that's where it got us. No good deed goes unpunished. They put us in jail and told us that they'd let us go if we would just stop the Jesus stuff, stop the healing stuff. Just stuff it, they said. Be good Jewish boys. But our mommies taught us better. The rabbi taught us better. We know what it means to be a good Jewish boy. Take responsibility for yourself. Take responsibility for your neighbor. It's what happens when you have a close encounter of the resurrection kind.

I don't know what that is going to look like in your life. Lord knows I'm sure you're busy. I'm sure you have a lot to worry about. But I'm guessing that a lot of different people get presented to you every day. Driving up and down this road I bet you see a lot of neighbors. You probably read about them all the time. You probably hope someone else is going to take care of them. You probably even think that a lot of people have what's coming to them. You might even think that God helps those who help themselves. You might even think that's in the Bible – but it's not. But just as that rabbi stood beside our boat and said, "Follow me. I'll make you fish for people." Just as that rabbi said from the cross, "Behold your mother." Just as the Messiah lay lame outside the temple gate begging for alms. There comes a time when a man has to do what a man has to do. There comes a time when in order to embrace the future you have to let go of the past. There comes a time when you have to get out of the boat and start fishing for people. That's all he ever wanted me

to do—was to fish for people. That's all he ever wanted you to do – fish for people. Isn't it time? Isn't it time? Isn't it time to drop the nets and get out of the boat?