

“(Just Like) Starting Over”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for April 10th 2016 (Third Sunday of Easter)
by Foster Freed

John 21: 1-19

Of the numerous things—the numerous and significant things—that differentiate the 4th Gospel, John’s Gospel, from the other three, one of the most noteworthy is that John’s Gospel includes almost twice as much resurrection narrative (Easter narrative) than the others: so much Easter material, in fact, that those who subsequently divided the Bible into chapters, came to the conclusion that there were two chapters worth of Easter stories in John rather than the one chapter found in Matthew and Luke...and the scarcely long enough to constitute one chapter found in Mark. And so: whereas last week we spent our time delving into the implications a John chapter 20 Easter story—the story of Thomas—this week we have an opportunity to ponder the fairly lengthy Easter story found in John’s subsequent chapter. And yes: this delightful story would not be available to us apart from its presence in John.

And it **is** a delightful story: filled with all of the mischief, irony and symbolism that is part and parcel of the Gospel of John at its best. After all, the situation it depicts, in and of itself, provides a satirical commentary on the short attention spans of at least seven of Christ’s closest friends: friends who concluded (mere days after the miracle of Easter) that they had nothing better to do than go fishing! While there is nothing dishonourable about that particular pursuit—either as a hobby or as a way of life—it was not the way of life for which Jesus had singled **them** out and for which he had equipped **them** during their intensive training period with him. And so here, as they sit in their boat—having caught absolutely nothing—the risen Christ has no choice but to renew their call. He does so...

...he does so in a way they would have immediately recognized, telling them to try fishing on the other side (perhaps a not so subtle invitation for them to turn their priorities around!) and then—when they follow his instructions—rewarding them with a catch so immense that they struggle to haul it all in.

Incidentally: I have absolutely no idea what the symbolic significance of the 153 fish might be. The tiny bit of research I did turned up roughly 153 possibilities: at least one bright idea per fish. Knowing that this is John’s Gospel, I’m fairly certain that the number 153 does have symbolic meaning; scholars have never been able to establish just what that meaning might be! At any rate!

Having caught their attention, the stranger on the beach—who is now no longer a stranger— is clearly recognized as the Lord, first by the so-called

beloved disciple. This causes Simon Peter to get dressed; I didn't know Middle Eastern fishermen back then fished in the nude, but perhaps Peter's nakedness is simply a metaphor for the spiritual nakedness in which Peter now stands. Let's not forget: Peter had managed to disgrace himself the last time he stood around a fire in Christ's proximity, managing to deny Jesus not once, not twice but three times before the cock crowed for a second time. And yes:

Here in John 21, Jesus gives Simon Peter the opportunity to affirm his love for him three times, a tri-fold restoration, if you please. "*Simon, son of John: do you love me more than these?*"...presumably meaning, **do you love me more than these others love me...**to which Simon Peter responds: "*Yes Lord, you know that I love you...*" eliciting from Christ this simple command: "*Feed my lambs.*" With that, Christ asks the question a second time, prompting Peter again to answer: "*Yes Lord, you know that I love you.*" But Christ is not done with him yet and asks the same question a third time, seemingly provoking a wee bit of irritation from Peter: "*Lord, you know everything! You know that I love you!*": a response to which Jesus replies by speaking of Peter's eventual martyrdom, his eventual death as a witness to Christ. Thus is Peter's denial put to rest...thus is he fully reconciled to the One he had once betrayed...thus is Peter restored to the person he was always meant to be...thus is he restored to his rightful place of leadership in the Church....and thus...thus: **we** are reminded of the way in which Christ works restoratively in the lives of all of his friends.

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The story is told...have no idea whether or not its apocryphal, but even if it is, it's a pretty good story...story about a young man...a young seeker...

...a young person asking all the tough questions many of us ask as we come of age: the familiar questions concerning the meaning of life, and the extent to which the Gospel may or may not help us answer those questions.

One day, just such a seeker, a young man wrestling with just such questions, approached an elderly monk. He asked the monk: "What do you do in the monastery?" The old monk thought for just a moment and then replied: "Well, we fall down and we get up. We fall down again and we get back up. And then we fall down once more and once more we get back up."

And you know, I've got to tell you. The very worst thing we can do with the story of Peter is to imagine that Peter—having been restored not only to Christian discipleship but to Christian leadership—henceforth lived a flawless life. It would be a horrendous mistake to imagine such a thing on any given Sunday; but to imagine such a thing on a baptismal Sunday...

...a Sunday when we not only have the privilege of offering the gift of baptism to two young friends of this congregation, but through them the privilege of reminding ourselves that we are a baptized and baptizing church...

...to imagine that passing through these waters somehow exempts us from all of the foibles and vulnerabilities to which flesh is prone, would be to confuse in the most horrendous of ways, the essential meaning of the Christian life. Let's be clear! The life to which we are called is not a life in which we must nervously guard our every step and our every move lest (with even one misstep) we place ourselves outside the bounds of God's love. God forbid! In fact: were that actually the case, **were** it possible to place ourselves outside the bounds of God's love, we should be refusing baptism to Amy and Mia, inviting them instead to indulge in that silliest of ancient practices: the one in which people chose to postpone their baptism until just before they lay on their death-bed, in effect arriving at the gates of heaven without the possibility of having any post-baptismal sin with which to contend. Kind of sad...kind of sad to be so untrusting in God's tender mercies, that you spend your time figuring out a loophole, a way of pulling a fast one on the old guy in order to stand any chance whatsoever at entering the Kingdom! God spare us such absurdity! And yes!

As a wise man put the thing a long time ago: *God is not mocked!* God knows us as we are, for who we are. And no one gets away with evading the hard gaze of the One who loves us not because we've managed to hoodwink Him, but because of the power and purity of His love. Simon Peter didn't get away with anything; on the contrary, he was given an opportunity—as he shared breakfast on the beach with his Lord—he was given an opportunity to be reminded of just how serious a betrayal he had committed only a few days earlier. But that reminder of betrayal is not the final, but merely the next to last word Christ speaks to Peter: *Feed my lambs! Tend my sheep! Feed my sheep!* Those are the words with which Christ **leaves** Peter: making it clear that Peter is being given the opportunity to begin again: “just like, starting over”. Like that aging monk, Peter learned that when you fall down, you get back up and continue the journey with Christ.

And that—quite simply—is what we mean when we speak, when the Church speaks, of the Gospel. The Gospel is the offer of God's unconditional love, made known in the life, the death, above all in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The miracle of Easter—and the reason baptism is especially appropriate during the season of Easter—is its reminder that even the grave, even death itself, poses no obstacle to the unconditional love that God-in-Christ has offered us. And yes...I know: the word “unconditional” can make some of us uneasy, can especially make us preachers uneasy. We are always tempted to qualify it and cage it in so that, in effect we end up saying: **provided** you do this and that, you'll have God's love...or worse still...provided you **avoid** doing this or that, you'll have God's love. But that's not the Gospel; there's no good news to be found in that! Once you begin to qualify it, once you begin to take slivers let

alone chunks out of it, you take the Gospel right out of it as well. And though it is true that we are called to respond faithfully to the Gospel—though it ought to be obvious that Christ calls us to love as we have been loved—the focus of the Gospel itself is not about whether we respond properly, or even if we respond at all. The Gospel is the proclamation...

...well...to quote my favourite Apostle:

The Gospel is the proclamation that *in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them.* That's the Gospel. Or try this on for size.

For our sake he made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. That's outrageous. But you know what. That's the Gospel. Or listen to this.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. That's the Gospel. Or listen here.

Just as one man's sin led to condemnation for all [he's speaking of Adam in the garden], *so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all!* Nothing hesitant about that affirmation; no qualifiers, no ifs ands or buts! **Justification and life for all!** That's the Gospel. And finally this...above all this!

*I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. **Nothing! Nothing! Nothing whatsoever!** Neither death nor life! Neither angels nor rulers! Neither things present, nor things to come. Neither powers nor height nor depth nor anything else! Will be able to do what? Will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!* That's pure affirmation. And yes: that's pure Gospel.

Friends in Christ! Can we break God's heart? Can we misuse and abuse the promise God makes to us in baptism? Of course we can: and probably do so more often than we like to imagine. But can we cause God to write us off; can we cause God to be done with us? Can we cause God's grace to give up on us?

On the contrary. It's just like starting over!

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Hallelujah. Amen!