

Fish on the other side

Easter 3C—April 10, 2016

[Note: this transcript was meant to be heard, not read.]

“Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’”

Will you pray with me? Thou, which no name or image can fully define, slow us down so that we might experience your presence in unexpected places. Inspire, inspire, inspire... Let this be so!

[Play song “Try Everything”]

*“I messed up tonight, I lost another fight
I still mess up but I’ll just start again
I keep falling down, I keep on hitting the ground
I always get up now to see what’s next”*

Think about this for a moment... when, in your life have you messed, screwed or mucked up? Don’t worry, you won’t need to testify. Just think about your life.

Put up your hand—way up—if you have never, ever in your entire life messed up. The key word is *never*. Take a look around. Nobody has put their hand up. What this means is that you are in good company. You are surrounded by comrades and companions in this life who know the experience of falling down, of failing and experiencing the figurative thump of hitting the ground.

This is the entering point of today’s gospel stories. You might want to consider today’s story as a mini movie. Like any movie, like any good story, there are multiple storylines. You might be surprised to know the whole of the Gospel of John is in fact created by multiple authors and in different stages or time periods.

The writings have been edited and reedited and then changed some more. The Johannine community began as a Judaic-Christian community following the death of the one called Jesus the Messiah. They were originally Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah. The followers identified Jesus as God.

Time and circumstances impacted the Christ followers. Following the destruction of the Jewish temple, faith, tradition, ritual and community imploded. Rome had decimated the Jews.

Rome destroyed and knocked out the Jews. Down came the temple and most of the city of Jerusalem. Literally everything hit the ground.

Everyone would have been discombobulated. When you fall, when you hit the ground, you know you get confused.

At some point after the temple destruction, the Johannine community pushed away from its Judaic roots. Both Judaic communities and Christ follower communities picked themselves up. The believers got up again and again. They didn't give up; they didn't give in.

The Johannine community emerged into a new experience. That new experience was separate. Think of them as the '70s hippies—by that, I mean the year 70. The movement of following Christ became a counter-cultural movement.

When we read the gospel of John, we are reading from authors who are pushing and contrasting against Judaism. I want you to hold that image of pushing against. The Christ community is pushing against what was.

When you push against something, you move away. When you move away, you begin to define or redefine who you are. When you fall, when you muck up, you have one of two choices. Which will you choose? You can choose to lie where you have fallen OR you can push away and stand back up again.

Shakira writes that “Birds don't just fly, they fall down and get up. Nobody learns without getting it wrong.” Hear those words again. Nobody learns without getting it wrong.

Going deeper into today's gospel... You all know that the one called Peter kind of screwed up in a big way. If you are not familiar with the story, following Jesus's arrest, the disciple Peter is asked about his relationship with Jesus. Peter screws up not just once, not just twice, but three times. Three times Peter denies that he knows Jesus.

The scene of today's story is at the edge of a lake. Theologian and author John Killinger writes that, “Lakes, in both fairy tales and sacred legends, are strange and symbolic places. Because they are often deep and hold secrets that can't be discerned from the surface, they are the residences of mystery.”

Peter and all of the followers of Jesus must have been emotionally devastated and most certainly fearful. They are a shattered group.

Some of you know the experience of being shattered. A lover leaves. A job is denied. A doctor reports.

Notice what Peter does. He says he is going fishing. He is going to go back and do what he had been doing and pretend as if what happened never happened. Is Peter in denial?

What are the authors wanting the listener to hear and think about?

Peter says I am going fishing and the others say, “me too!”

They are all out on this sea that really is a lake. You can easily be on one shoreline and clearly see the other shoreline. They are out there doing the familiar, tossing their nets that they have tossed so many times before they got hooked by that teacher who talked about so new possibilities.

In the gospel of John, the writers have Jesus speak about being the good shepherd. Being a good shepherd is a complete contrast to a warrior king as the Messiah. There is a shift happening in the Christian movement.

Doing what they had been doing, doing what had been familiar, gave them what?

They got empty nets. On the shore, they felt empty. The wind had been knocked out of them. With the execution of Jesus, the wind was knocked out of them. The spirit of the movement was gone. I need to add to that, and say that the spirit of the movement as they had known it was gone.

Going back to your failures: do you know the experience of having the wind knocked out of you, figuratively having the wind, your spirit, dashed away?

Back to the gospel story: picture the scene. Peter and the others are out on their boat, fishing and experiencing zero change. The nets are empty. Take a closer look at Peter. He is naked. Ask yourself, why would the authors put that into the story?

How many of you have ever had to stand before others and be completely naked? Even if you haven't had that experience, you can already imagine how you would feel.

To be naked is to be vulnerable. To be naked takes away your ability to hide any imperfections that you think your body holds. To be naked takes away any sense of protection.

Someone on the beach yells out to the fishers, "Fish from the other side." Don't give up; do something different. To fish from the other side is to do something completely different—to do and to experience something unexpected.

"That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, *he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.*"

Isn't that odd, different or even in contrast to what you or I might have done? If I was going to jump into a lake, I am more apt to take my clothes off before I jump, lest I be pulled under or have the annoyance of having to sit in wet clothes.

Peter puts clothes on. In his uncertainty, in his fragility, Peter wants to hide his vulnerability.

The writers are building and building to create a teaching. This is a teaching from the Johannine community about whom that Jesus became. This is a story of loss, of falling down, of being vulnerable. That is all true. This is also a much bigger story.

This is an Easter story. This story is no less and no more of all the Easter stories that we read in this part of the year. This story is no more and no less than your stories of how, in this life, you have been knocked down and counted out. You know where you have failed. You know where others have failed you. Some of us have stubbed toes and bruised knees from falling down so often.

Another story is added to today's story. It is a story of incredible intimacy and profound impact.

"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."

"Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter again said to Jesus, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."

Jesus said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And Peter said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

What are the writers communicating? Earlier in the gospel of John, Jesus is called the Good Shepherd. The Divine is called the Good Shepherd.

Jesus says to Peter, "Feed my sheep." If you are responsible for feeding and caring for sheep, you would be considered what? A shepherd. A good shepherd.

This is a dangerous, radical book because it is teaching a dramatic and profound shift in how the listeners and the faith community think of themselves and, more broadly, how they think of God.

It was true then and there and it is true here and now. You are called ... you are called ... you are the Christ.

John Shelby Spong [writes](#):

The gospel texts have nothing to do with an external God, a God out there entering humanity in the person called Jesus. This gospel attempts to describe the experience of you and I breaking the boundaries of consciousness and entering into the transformation that is available inside a sense of a mystical oneness with God.

This is a big radical shift. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?"

This is a dangerous message. Spong goes on to say that "the Fourth Gospel has the potential to become the primary biblical source through which Christianity can be changed dramatically to speak with radical freshness to the 21st century."

The call to the disciples is the call to you to not be afraid, to pick yourself up. To fish from the other side is to reach and explore where you have never gone. To dive deeper where there is no separation between you and the holy.

Don't misunderstand: fishing on the other side is scary, but to keep on doing what you have been doing is life-sucking, life-destroying.

Christianity is not about the divine becoming human so much as it is about the human becoming divine. That is a shakeup. That is a paradigm shift of the first order. Imagine for just a moment the community, the world we could experience if we realized that God is within—God is within everything that you see, everything that you touch.

This is the Easter story. If you have fallen down, rise up, get up. You are resurrection. You are life. Rise up to see what's next, because this is good news indeed.