

Sermon preached by Lee Barstow on April 22, 2007
South Congregational Church, Amherst, Massachusetts

Lectionary readings

John 21:1-19 (read in service: 21:9-17)

²¹After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That 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. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. ⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He 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 he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten

Sermon

It has been two weeks since Easter Day, but according to our church calendar, we have lots more Easter celebrating to do. There are five more weeks, to be exact, before we remember Pentecost, when the wild wind of the Holy Spirit swept through the followers of Jesus.

But now, in these remaining days of Easter, there is this time of quiet, when we have a chance to recover from the trauma of holy week and the wonder of Easter. These are the days when we are given the chance to look again at our lives, to take stock of all that grieves us, and to remember the miracle of the resurrection.

This is the time when we remember that the resurrection story is not only about *Jesus* coming back to life. It is not just about his resurrection appearances to the disciples and his commissioning of Peter and Paul to continue his work in the world. It is **not** just an ancient fairy tale we tell ourselves because it is our tradition to do so.

Rather, our tradition tells this story because it is also it is about **us** in **our** time, as we face **our** demons. We delve into it year after year because we need to remember that God's power to transform is as real today as it was 2,000 years ago.

Here is what I believe and what I struggle to remember again each time I forget: No matter how desperate we perceive our situation, if we can open our minds to the idea that God's grace holds promises which are beyond our wildest imaginings, and if we are willing to cooperate with that grace, our experience can be utterly transformed.

It is the message of the resurrection, I think, and it is a message that can help us in any area of our lives where we are stuck and in pain. And on this 37th Earth Day, when we are needed more than ever to open to new possibilities for action, the resurrection story can help us take up the work of healing.

Let's look at our two stories from scripture to see what they say about all this.

We turn first to the story of Saul's conversion to see what it says about the power of truth to break through rigid beliefs.

Saul of Tarsus was a deeply religious Jew. He lived a life that was as faithful to God's will as he knew how. This is why he persecuted Jesus' followers. He thought God wanted him to. He believed that the Jesus movement was a *perversion* of the truth, an *affront* to God, a *blasphemy*.

If, on the day before this story occurs, you had asked Saul if it would *ever* be possible that he would become a follower of Jesus, he would have been insulted. Not even *remotely* possible, he would have said.

any way *earn*. We do not *earn* the miracle that brings new plants from seeds in the spring, or the rain that waters them, or the sun that gives them life. We do not *earn* the grace of God that gives us food to live.

And yet, we can't just lay back and let God do all the work. We have to plant the seeds and tend the garden. As the epistle of James says, "Faith without works is dead." We *do* have some type of responsibility to apply ourselves.

How tricky this is! If we try to be *too* responsible, we take control from God, and we make a mess of things. But if we don't do enough, the growth made possible by our faith is stunted.

Our logical brains cry out for an answer: *Which is it?!* Are we taken care of automatically by the miracles that happen through God's grace? Or are *we* responsible for taking the actions that lead to a good life. *Which is it?!*

I believe the answer is that both are true. It's a paradox. In order to live the best life we can, we need to be open to receive miracles *and* we then we need to try to align our actions with God's will. The way for us to find the joy of living, I think, is to *cooperate* with God's grace.

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And so we are given the stories of the two men who built the church. Two men who would have thought of themselves as the least likely to be up to the task. One whose belief was in violent opposition to the truth, and one who knew the truth but lacked the courage to proclaim it.

Now of course, we are not being asked to be Peter or Paul. And yet, are we not urged to follow in their footsteps, which are indeed the footsteps of Jesus? Are we not asked to trust that God's kingdom *is* come, that God's will *is* done, on *earth* as it is in heaven?

This is not easy, especially when our brains work against us. There can be so many reasons to stay closed to God's grace.

"I can't ride my bike to work because I usually have to do errands on the way home. I don't have *time* to be involved in political action to help the environment—if I join an advocacy group, I'll just let them down. If I write a letter to my senator, or the newspaper, it won't do any good?"

The truth, of course, is that every action—however small—is better than no action. God equips us for the work he inspires us to do. We can't see it in advance, but if we can trust long enough to put one foot in front of the other, our capability unfolds step by step.

I'd like to close with a story I heard a few weeks ago which speaks to all this for me. I heard it at the gathering in Belchertown of the folks who were involved in the Interfaith Walk for Climate Rescue.