

Were You There? Pt. 8
What's Next?
John 21: 1-17

First Presbyterian Church
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This morning we conclude our series on the people of passion week. I will miss interacting with these characters day by day and week by week. So we return once more to Peter. In our story, Jesus has already appeared to the disciples on two occasions. They know that he is risen. But they don't yet know what they're supposed to be doing. They are waiting for Jesus to show up again and give them instructions. An angel had told the disciples to return north to Galilee, their home region, to await Jesus there.

Waiting is hard. We've all been waiting for normalcy for five weeks now. And we all wait in different ways. Our Italian greyhound Murray waits by making a high pitched, barely audible but highly annoying whine. My grandmother used to wait for doctor's appointments by sitting quietly in a chair in the living room an hour before she had to leave, church dress on, purse in lap, hands folded. Just in case. Others of us just need to be doing something.

Peter was a man of action. He couldn't take the waiting. They were back in Galilee. The lake was there. Their old boats were still around. Some fish could be caught; some money could be made. He jumped up, "I'm going fishing!" The other disciples jumped right in, "We're going with you!" They went back to what they knew how to do. Cast nets and haul them in. Work all night for a catch to make a living. Clean the boat, sell the fish, do what men do and provide. Get back to normal. That's great. Jesus is risen and everything, but we still have to do something!

I can certainly relate to their longing to work. For a return to the familiar. To get business churning. To make things happen. But I wonder how quickly I will forget all that I have learned in weeks of isolation. How fast will I throw off signs of resurrection life in favor of the old routine? Let's think for a bit today about what we have realized recently and what we don't want to forget.

Personally. Particularly in the beginning of quarantine, I had to face down anxiety about the future. I didn't sleep well. I had to wrestle through the stress of leading in a different way, with no outcomes certain. I realized I was in a fight for

spiritual peace. A battle ensued for coherence and focus while anxiety and uncertainty tried to erode my being centered in Christ. Daily time for reading, praying, and thinking through the promises and character of Christ Jesus became critical. I realized what I've always known but not always practiced. Taking more time for prayer and Scripture does not waste time. It multiplies time; it's essential to life. Also, I realized how good it is to take time for recollection. One person told me of opening at last a treasure box of things saved from the past for just such a day. To remember good times and loves. I've also loved practicing more mindfulness: to notice where I am, to name what I see and hear and smell. There is lamp light. That is the sound of dogs' feet on pavement. Wind is blowing through the trees and on my face. Stars shine. The world is, and I give thanks to the Giver. There's been a kind of resurrection in spiritual life. I don't want to forget that when the day comes that I can just get back to normal.

Being at home nearly all day and for every meal has had its own challenges and blessings. It's easy to descend into a haze of snacks and shows and lying around, feeling worse, and therefore lying around more, snacking and watching. I felt urgent, almost immediately, to exercise every day. To get out in the air. Spiritual health and physical activity are linked. I felt urgent to make good choices about eating, and I was amazed how, when you prepare and eat nearly every meal at home, you have a lot of control over what goes in. I've felt signs of a physical resurrection from better habits. I don't want to lose that either.

Socially. I grieve the downturn in business this quarantine has created. I worry for those whose practices and schools and businesses are in peril. Empty streets mean the economy is not humming. And yet. And yet. I can't help but feel the peacefulness now that more bicycles pass my house than cars. Our neighborhood created a stations of the cross experience on Good Friday. You could walk, bike or drive past 14 stations on Jesus' journey to the cross over 2.5 miles. So many people were out making the pilgrimage. Believers are making themselves known in winsome ways.

And I love seeing children outside. They are having bike adventures together. They are creating encouraging pictures and messages in chalk art. Children are playing creatively. For once, they are not being organized by adults into constant, frenetic activity. The children are less anxious, more imaginative. We have a resurrection in children's lives. Do we really want to go back to 7 days a week, 12 months a year of organized sports, arts and social activities with no margin and no break to figure out how to play?

People report loving the slower pace. They report learning how to live in a new way with the people they live with. Husbands and wives work in the same house. People with children eat together again and walk and play and do chores together. At last, the reason why we work so hard is given to us: to be with these people and to spend time with them, to see them and love them. That's been a kind of resurrection in realizing how to be together. I don't want to lose that either.

Communally. We've come to realize more than ever that all over the world, we are all just humans. We share the same biology. We share the same aspirations for life, family, and work. We care about the whole. We have drastically slowed economic activity in order to care for and protect the most vulnerable. We've discovered new heroes in health care work. We know we're all in this together. There's a resurrection in community solidarity. I don't want to lose that by going back to all our polarizing, marginalizing and labelling when the crisis recedes.

At the same time, we have seen revealed a truth we normally overlook. Yes, this virus can strike anyone anywhere of any means. But statistically, the poorest communities are hit the hardest. Poverty digs itself a deeper hole. Underlying conditions beget greater suffering when what is normal gets stressed. People literally wait in line to get food because they have none. Great suffering occurs all around me, but I don't see it when I'm in my normal bubble. There has been a resurrection in awareness that we have serious, endemic misery in our community. I don't want to forget that when my life cranks up again.

Peter couldn't take the waiting for Jesus. "I'm going fishing!" The problem is, once you know that Jesus is risen, you can't go back to business as usual. There's nothing wrong with fishing, or any other constructive work. But to try to live again without knowing what we now know just won't lead to fulfillment. We know that the abundance which fuels all our autonomy can vanish in a month. We know that thinking I control my destiny is an illusion. The ancient human mistake is declaring, "We can be as gods, make our lives whatever we want." No, we can't. And we can't go back again to the illusions our prosperity and freedom gave us. It's very instructive that Peter and the disciples caught nothing on their own that night they went back to fishing. The old life just won't fulfill now that you know what you know. And even getting all their prosperity back wouldn't satisfy. Once the great catch came in, they realized it wasn't the fish that mattered. It was seeing Jesus. Having a great haul of fish is fine, but not enough once you know life is about more.

So they had breakfast on the beach with Jesus. It felt like communion. He cooked. Then he took bread, broke it and gave it to them. He took fish and shared it with them. Bread and fish. Body and flesh. Take this and be in communion with me. This is what they had most been longing for. To see him again. To be with him. To learn how they were to live in this new reality of resurrection.

After breakfast, Jesus pulled Peter aside. To Peter who had denied Jesus three times, Jesus asked a question three times. “Do you love me?” Peter replied each time more ardently, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” And so each time Jesus gave Peter his mission, “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.” He reassured Peter by tasking him. He forgave the denials by giving him more to do. There’s nothing wrong with fishing. But it’s not an end in itself Peter. Love me by loving my lambs. You love me. Now show me that by caring for my little one wherever you are and whatever you are doing.

There’s no going back. Jesus is risen. Death is defeated. One man has shown himself to be Lord of life and death, Lord of all the cosmos. Once you know that, you can’t return to the old game of living just for yourself. You can’t think again that the point of your life is about being the *you* you dreamed up for yourself. It’s about shaping your life to love Jesus by knowing him for who he is and then loving his little ones in his name.

What’s next when the restrictions ease and we get back to business? We have been witnesses to the resurrection in these unprecedented times. Will I trade all that away to live life just the same? I don’t want to.

Personally, I want to spend more time in Scripture and prayer, in reflection, mindfulness and gratitude. All that time comes back in abundance. I do better work, and even more efficiently. I want to sleep more, exercise more eat more intentionally: I feel better, see better, think better, love better when I do.

Socially, I hope we will pace our children’s lives differently. I think it’s wrong to say “A busy child is a happy child.” Our children need some nonorganized time. Time to get in trouble, yes, that might happen. But time also to use their imaginations, to be calmer and less stressed, to be outside and with others. I hope we will realize that being at church, learning the great story of our faith, worshipping together with children and adults, forms us in what truly matters like nothing else. I hope we will take Sabbath keeping seriously as God’s plan for weekly rest.

Communally, I hope we will double down on those ministry initiatives that can change our community from the inside out. For now, the needs are more immediate. We've got to give blood as an act of service. It's safe, it's quick, and it is an immediate blessing. We've got to make sure our Food Bank has resources to feed people, and find ways to get food to others. When we get back, we want to thread ourselves more deeply into mentoring in schools and into teaching the healthy habits that actually lift people out of poverty. We want to get behind initiatives like Christian Outreach teaching job skills and financial literacy as they lead people to be self-sufficient. There are resurrectional ministries already in play. Together we can multiply those efforts.

Peter couldn't stand the waiting. "I'm going fishing!" I can't wait for all kinds of fishing to start again. But I don't want to forget what's happened either. We've seen resurrection. We've seen the mission field more clearly than ever before. We can get back to work, but we can't just go back to how it was. While we're waiting, we can open our spiritual eyes to realize Jesus waits every morning for us. He's got the fire started and the fish on the grill. Let's talk he says. I love you. I have risen. Do you love me? I know you do. So show me. After we spend this time together, go out and tend my sheep. There's no going back. Feed my lambs.

Prayer.

[So, now's your chance to make a comment or ask a question. You can chat through Facebook live, or email prayer@fpcbr.org. Just get them in by the end of our next song and I will try to reply at the end of the service.]