

**Sermon for Easter III Year C 2019**  
*Face Everything and Rise*

In February of 1971, when I was a junior,  
my Staten Island high school which had more than 2,000 students,  
went through a racially tense time  
that climaxed with a riot in the school cafeteria.  
I was there when the fights broke out.  
In fact, I was sitting right next to the table where the initial fight began.  
Having been knocked off my chair in the scuffle that was taking place  
directly behind me,  
a very tall young man reached down and pulled me to my feet  
and escorted me to the exit door.  
“Susan, this is not a safe place for you to be.  
You need to get out of the building.”  
Ron and I barely knew each other—  
we didn’t “run” in the same circles in high school—  
I was theater, he was basketball  
I was a serious introvert,  
he was an extrovert and everyone’s favorite guy to hang around with;  
I was white, and he was black.  
And, yet, there he was making sure I got out of a situation that got quite  
dangerous and eventually made the evening news.  
Ron and I didn’t have much contact again after that scary day,  
Years after graduation, we are Facebook friends  
and every morning he sends me (along with his other FB friends)  
a motivational message.  
Yesterday morning this was his message:  
Fear---FEAR—has two meanings:  
Forget everything and run or  
Face everything and rise.  
The choice is yours.

The message made me think about Peter in our gospel today.

Peter had his moments of fear—the right kind and the wrong kind—but he eventually chose to face everything and rise.

When something terrible happens—  
when we've done something wrong,  
when we've failed ourselves and failed others,  
misbehaved or outright sinned,  
often it's not the discovery of those things that are most painful,  
but the aftermath—the shame that is the most difficult to face and bear.

If we live in homes or communities where restoration is not practiced,  
then we never say or hear, “I forgive you,” or “It will get better,”  
or “I still love you.”

Often what happens is the wrongdoer is abandoned in a midst of thick,  
damning silence

Affection is withdrawn to reestablish honor.

Eyes are averted, authentic conversation is shut down,  
and the offense and offender are rendered invisible.

Eventually, after hours, days, or weeks—months—  
depending on the severity of the sin—

the ice is thawed and life returns to a kind of bruised normal.

But a wound still festers below the surface.

And a thick, hot shame can fill the soul that  
seems to affirm that we are unfixable, unlovable, and just wrong.

This week's gospel reading begins with shame.

It begins with the disciple Peter battling his shame  
on a fishing boat in the Sea of Tiberias.

Peter the Rock.

Peter whom Jesus astounded with a miraculous catch of fish.

Peter, “a fisher of men.”

Peter who proclaimed Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God before any  
other disciple dared to.

Peter whose mother-in-law Jesus healed.

Peter who walked (at least for a few moments) on water.

Peter who saw Jesus transfigured on a mountaintop.  
Peter who promised to stay by Jesus' side even unto death.  
Peter whose courage failed so catastrophically around a charcoal fire on  
the night of Jesus' arrest that I would bet he expected to spend the rest of  
his life fleeing from one single, searing memory:  
*Hey! I saw you with Jesus! You are one of his followers!*  
*No, no I am not! I don't even know the man!*

Though he managed to unlock the doors and get out of the house,  
complicated, wounded Peter returns to his fishing boat.  
Isn't that what we all do when we're ashamed?  
Retreat to whatever is safe, comfortable, and familiar?  
Run headlong towards something—*anything*—  
that will help us feel competent and worthy again?  
And, so, Peter flees to his boat, his nets, his vocation before Jesus.  
As if there is some time or place in his life where shame is not.  
Where his wound is not.  
Where Jesus is not.

But of course, there is no time or place in our stories where Jesus isn't.  
He is just as present in our fleeing as he is everywhere else.  
Jesus is just as loving in the midst of our failures  
as he is when we succeed.  
It's not Jesus who has stakes in drawing out our humiliation  
or maximizing our penance.  
That stuff is on us.  
It's in our flawed understanding of God.  
It's in our voyeuristic obsession with other people's failures.  
Our need to rebuke and shame wrongdoers  
in order to make us feel more pure, more "right."  
Jesus doesn't have those flaws, obsessions, or needs.  
His will is reconciliation,  
his joy is grace.

But Peter doesn't know this.

So, he spends a long night trying to catch fish without Jesus.  
And he fails.  
Dawn breaks.  
Jesus shows up, and a miraculous catch follows the night of futility.  
Peter finds himself, breathless and soaked,  
sitting by a charcoal fire again but this time at daybreak.  
Peter is now looking into the eyes of the Lord he denied three times.  
And three times, he faces three costly questions. Again.

What I find both searing and instructive in this story  
is the way Jesus saves Peter—  
by returning him to the source of his shame.  
He doesn't wrap the humiliated disciple in bubble-wrap or gauze.  
He doesn't avoid the hard conversation.  
He doesn't pretend that Peter's denials didn't happen and didn't wound.  
But neither does Jesus preach, condemn, accuse, or retaliate.  
He feeds.  
He feeds Peter's body—  
here is some bread and some fish, fresh off the grill—  
and he feed's Peter's soul.  
He surrounds the self-loathing disciple with tenderness and safety,  
inviting him to revisit his shame for the sake of healing,  
restoration, and commissioning—  
*Do you love me?*  
*Do you love me?*  
*Do you love me?*  
*Feed my sheep---*just as I have loved and fed you.

You can forget everything and run away.  
Or you can face everything and rise . . .  
and keep on following me.

As I consider this part of Peter's story,  
I wonder what our failures would feel like  
if we offered each other the safety Jesus offers his disciple.

A safe way to return to the heart of our wrongdoing and despair.  
A safe way to return to wrap fresh language around our failure.  
A safe way to experience unconditional love in the midst of our shame.  
A safe way to try again.  
A safe way for a new beginning, a new starting point.  
What would our witness look like if we, the church, epitomized Jesus' version of reconciliation?  
What would the world be like if Christians were known as the people to run to in times of humiliation?  
Can we, like Jesus, become sanctuary for the shamed?

Around the fire Jesus builds,  
Peter's fear and denial—*I don't know the man*—  
evolves into trust and worship—  
*Lord, you know everything.*  
*You know that I love you.*  
In the end, Peter realizes that it's what Jesus knows that matters.

Jesus knows that you and I  
are more than our worst failures and betrayals.  
Jesus knows the deep places we flee to when we fail.  
And Jesus knows how to build the fire and prepare the meal  
that will beckon us back to shore.  
Jesus' appearance to Peter—  
like all of the post-resurrection appearances in the gospels—  
speaks volumes about God's priorities.

In the days following the resurrection,  
Jesus doesn't waste a single moment on revenge or retribution.  
He doesn't storm into Pilate's house and point an accusing finger,  
he doesn't avenge himself on Rome  
or punish the soldiers whose hands drove nails into his.  
Instead, he spends his time before his ascension  
feeding, restoring, and strengthening his friends.  
He calls Mary Magdalene by name as she cries.

He offers his wound to Thomas in his moments of doubt;  
he grills bread and fish for his hungry disciples.  
He heals what's wounded and festering between his heart and Peter's.

In other words, Jesus focuses on relationship, on reconciliation, on love.  
He spends this time delivering his children from fear, despair,  
self-hatred, and paralysis.

He wastes no time on triumphalism or smugness.  
Even at the height of his power, he chooses humility.  
He chooses to linger on a lonely beach till dawn,  
waiting for his hungry children to realize how much they need him.  
He chooses to be vulnerable with Peter  
by asking a question about denial whose answer might hurt.  
He chooses to feed and tend his sheep.  
Jesus faces it all, he rises and he raises us along with him.

Peter's shame meets Jesus' grace.  
And grace wins!  
That's the gospel story in a nutshell—  
The love of God in Jesus is not for the condemnation of the world,  
but for our salvation.

Writer and research professor Brene Brown puts it this way:  
"Shame cannot survive being spoken."  
Meaning, shame cannot survive the living Word.  
Shame cannot tolerate the resurrection.  
When shame encounters the God who is Love,  
it burns to ash and scatters.  
And our mourning is turned into dancing.

Beloved children, it is now time to face everything and rise  
and follow him.