

You Can't Go Home, Peter!

From the series: Christian Faith: Interpreting An Experience

Text: Acts 10:36; John 21:19

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In this season of Eastertide it will be my intention to enable you to see how Christian faith is the consequence of interpretations of experience. That is true of all religion. Someone or some group has a significant experience, and out of that experience comes the attempt to articulate that experience and eventually the analysis of the experience that issues in a more systematic and intellectual account of the experience. But it always starts with an experience and the Christian faith, the Christian church, the tradition of which we are a part - everything that it is, is a consequence of a foundational experience and the interpretations of that experience. For the Christian church, the Christian movement, the Christian tradition, the foundational experience is Easter. For the Jewish people, the foundational experience was the Exodus, which is remembered every year with the Passover festival. This past week the Christian church remembered its foundational experience in celebrating Easter; the Jewish community remembered its foundational experience in a celebration of Passover. That is true, not only of Christianity and Judaism; every great religious movement has a foundational experience. That foundational experience, then, cries out for expression.

Have you ever gone somewhere and had some great experience and come home and tried to tell your spouse or your children about it? You say, "I don't have words, I wish I had words, I can't tell you about it. I just can't... there's no way I could communicate what I just experienced." But, of course, you go on trying to communicate what you've just experienced, nonetheless, and you grab for language, metaphors, images, symbols, one way or another to try to articulate, to give expression to that which you've experienced, because that which you have experienced was so dramatic that you need to talk about it. Language is necessary in order to keep us from exploding when we've had that tremendous experience.

Eventually the metaphors and the images and the symbols point to the experience and then we begin to reflect on the images and the symbols and the metaphors in order to understand what really was going on down there, the insights that accrue from that experience which came to expression in image and

metaphor. That's when we get the more conceptual analysis of the experience. That's the systematizing, the intellectual activity. Now you're into doctrine and theology and the movement's dead. The conceptualization of the metaphors and images which are the result of the experience - that's, of course, where we come in. That's what you do when the experience forms a movement, a community, and it takes on a life of its own. And then you pass it along by means of the conceptual understanding, the analysis of the experience and what it meant. But, you hope, even so, that the foundational experience will continue to be experienced again because, if it doesn't, it is dead. Then you are simply perpetuating a system of ideas which has no fire, no passion, no transformative affect on the life.

That is the nature of a lot of religion, isn't it? That is the nature of a lot of institutional religion. That is a description of a lot of what goes on in the church; it is the passing along without passion and fire and a transforming experience of a system of ideas, and a system of ideas never changed the world and never changed a person. It is finally, one would hope, in the communication of experience through image and symbol and metaphor and analysis that the experience would happen again.

This Eastertide I want us to see that what we have in the New Testament documents are the interpretations of experience, and those interpretations of experience are somewhat removed from the event itself. Following the crucifixion of Jesus and the experience of Jesus as living, present nonetheless, there was the telling of the story and the building and forming of community and, eventually as the decades move along, there was the felt need for the writing down, the documentation of that account of the experience, and so we have the New Testament documents. And then, of course, if you want to go on three, four and five centuries into the Christian movement, then you had the whole creedal development - 325, the Nicene Creed; 451, the Council of Chalcedon. You have the church for 500 years trying to say what the experience meant. But it started with somebody having an experience, and we're going to look at Peter today and Paul next week, and Mary the third week.

"Peter, you can't go home." Where do you think Easter happened for Peter? When do you think Easter happened for Peter? You say, "Well, it must have happened on Easter Sunday in Jerusalem."

The evidence is not clear. That's one of the liberating things I hope you will learn in this Eastertide, that the evidence is not clear. We have Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and you simply cannot reconcile those four accounts of what actually happened. The only thing they agree on is that Jesus was crucified, Jesus dead and buried, and that Jesus was experienced as a living reality by the community that followed in his name. But, if you put those four Gospel accounts together, you will find an impossible complex of meetings and encounters and persons, and

there is no way to reconcile them. So, I doubt that Peter on Easter Sunday celebrated the resurrection, was encountered by the risen Lord.

We don't know, but there is this clue in John 21. Peter was in Galilee and he says, "I'm going fishing." And the others say, "We'll go with you." Now, it seems to me that the picture that the author is painting for us is a Peter before Easter, a Peter before the experience of that living one, that non-material, living presence, that same Jesus but no longer in the form of flesh, but in a radically new form. I think that Peter is going fishing because Peter is trying to pick up his life again, because Peter's life had been shattered. His dreams had been shattered; his hopes had been dashed. Peter, who thought that Jesus was the Messiah, Peter, who thought that Jesus was going to establish the twelve tribes, Peter, who thought that the kingdom would come, the heavens would open, that he would be on the inside track – Peter saw Jesus crucified and not only crucified, but crucified before Peter could say, "I'm sorry for denying you three times; I'm sorry for my pride and for my arrogance; I'm sorry for my buffoonery and my bullheadedness, ... all that makes me who I am. I'm sorry."

Jesus was crucified; Peter went back to Galilee. And he was going to go fishing because, if our life has been torn apart and all of our hopes and dreams have been shattered, the thing we need is something familiar, something we can manage, something we can handle. Peter was going back to fishing. And the others said, "We'll go with you."

But, you can't really go home, Peter, because you've seen too much. You know too much; you have experienced too much. You walked with that one too long, you've sat at table with him, you saw him break bread, you saw him throw the arms of embrace around the excluded, you saw the compassion that flowed out of him, you saw the love with which he moved, the compassion that marked his life, the grace that drenched him. Peter, you can't go home. You saw too much. You can't just go back to your fishing.

Maybe that's what this 21st chapter of John's Gospel is about. The weight of scholarly opinion says that chapter 21 was slapped onto the Gospel that really concluded with the 20th chapter. I don't know. It doesn't make any difference. I think what the 21st chapter is trying to deal with is the place of Peter in the ongoing community and his relationship with John, the beloved disciple. So, what we have here is Peter going fishing, and Boom! There's a miracle. There's a great big catch of fish, 153 fish, after they had labored all night and gotten nothing. They throw the net on the other side and there they are.

John's Gospel begins with the wedding at Cana; they run out of wine. Jesus produces more wine than any decent wedding reception could possibly use.

Where Jesus is, there's abundance. Where Jesus is absent, there's lack.

Is John telling us things that really happened? Or, is John painting a picture for us? Is John trying to tell us about this One? Of course, he's trying to tell us about this One. There probably never was a wedding in Cana and there probably never was a breakfast on the Sea of Tiberius. But, there was this One, this Jesus who was crucified and who, in the wake of his crucifixion, was experienced as not dead but still alive, a presence.

So, the author tells us about the abundance of the catch and, in the intimacy of a breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, what happened was the same thing that always happens. Jesus had been crucified. Peter is off in Galilee, trying to run away. But, now Peter and the other disciples have a breakfast around the charcoal fire, bread and fish, and you know, it's like it always was, like nothing changed, like he was right there. They sensed his presence in the inclusiveness of that intimate breakfast. Peter thought he could go home, and instead gets commissioned three times over to match the three times of denial (nice literary stuff) in order to say, "Peter, you are charged with responsibility for this ongoing movement. Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. And Peter, the bottom line is this - follow me."

When Peter was called in the first place, Jesus said, "Follow me." And the post-crucified Jesus says to Peter, "Follow me." And somehow or other, in the midst of the experience, Peter is convinced that that same Jesus Christ for whom he had so many hopes and dreams was with him still, living still, in the life of God, going before him, calling him to follow, calling him to keep the movement alive, calling him to do all that he had seen Jesus do in a continuing, growing movement of resurrection in this old world that is a Good Friday world.

In this world that is a Good Friday world, there are those signs of resurrection and Easter keeps happening. That's the only reason that we are here, 2000 years later, because Easter keeps happening. We are not here because there was a body that came out of a tomb 2000 years ago. We are here because the living Christ continues to confront those who look out into their world and suddenly, in a moment, experience the presence of the resurrected one, and scales fall from their eyes and they see. We'll see next week that it happened to Paul. And I think it happened to Peter in Galilee along the lake as he was going fishing. Suddenly he realized that Jesus was not dead, but alive, that all the hopes and dreams that had been crushed in Jerusalem were not really crushed but simply channeled into a new direction in which he was to lead the flock into the future into a Good Friday world with marks of Easter.

Jesus was born into this world and the doctrine of the Incarnation roots the whole foundational experience of the Christian church in history. Something happened back there. There was a Jesus. He was flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone and he was crucified, dead, and buried. And following that experience, here and there, now and again, someone saw him, experienced him, and continued to follow him. That's what Easter's all about. That's why Easter keeps

happening. That's why Easter is not on a Sunday three days after crucifixion. Easter is the moment in the world when the risen One is experienced as a power of the future.

For example, on February 25 of this year a new president was inaugurated in Korea, Korea that had been in the throes of military dictatorship and oppressive domination for so long, and the new president had behind him a General Chung, who, in 1980 came within a hair's breadth of executing the new president who was a dissident at the time. But this new president, before he was inaugurated with the then reigning president, agreed to the liberation of political prisoners because he said, "In my new regime there will be no political retaliation." A sign of Easter in this old world that is still a Good Friday world.

Nelson Mandela spent 18 years in a cell and is able now to entertain the President of the United States and even give him a lesson or two in moral authority, and in South Africa, within the last decade, there is a transformed situation with all of the problems that still remain, but it is a sign of resurrection in this old world that is still a Good Friday world.

Do you still remember in the late 80s when we would not ever have expected it, would not have dared dream about it, the Berlin Wall fell one day and that great divide, that impasse, the Iron Curtain, was removed? We move again into tribalism and ethnic cleansing and it's not as though everything is rosy, but we are moving at least; there are signs of resurrection in this old world. It is possible. I can paint with you a very dark picture of the human situation and then I can also point to you signs of resurrection and of Easter, because there are people now and again, here and there, for whom the scales fall off their eyes and they see what Jesus stood for and what Jesus was - the inclusivity of his table fellowship, the compassion of his life, the grace of God that flowed through him, and there is transformation, there is salvation, there is healing, there is the mending of creation, here and there.

Peter, you can't go home. You can't go back fishing, because there's a Roman soldier named Cornelius who needs to hear about Jesus. Peter has a vision. Cornelius has a vision, and sends for Peter. Peter comes, having had the scales fall off his eyes at the Sea of Tiberius, but only partially. And now he's confronted with a concrete situation.

"Now, what do I do? Jesus said, 'Follow me.' What does that mean, now? Here's Cornelius; he's a Roman soldier; he's a Gentile. Jews by law according to Torah have nothing to do with Gentiles. I can't be an observant Jew and sit at the table of a Gentile. I can't even go over the threshold of his house!"

More scales. Rubbing his eyes. Coming into Cornelius' house, not too sensitively saying, "You know, I shouldn't be here." He knew he shouldn't be there; his whole training, his whole tradition, his whole study of Torah said he shouldn't be there. But, he hears Jesus' word, "Follow me." Maybe he said, "What would Jesus do?"

And he opens his mouth, moving now beyond the initial experience, but on the basis of the experience, and says, "Well, my, I see that God shows no partiality."

Do you hear it? Can you sense at all what that meant to Peter? That God shows no partiality?

Peter, you have to be kidding. You're running counter to your whole experience as God's special, elect people.

But, you see, the worm continues to turn, and the insights continue to come from those who have had their eyes opened and begin to draw the implications of what they see, because when you see it, you can't go home. Once you see it, the word of Jesus, "Follow me," is compelling. Once you see it, you recognize that the world needs to see it, that there is salvation in no other way, that this is the way and the life and the truth, that there is no way to God except the way that Jesus opened.

So, you go into Cornelius' house and you start telling the story of Jesus and sort of, to justify this bold act, you say, "Jesus is Lord of all. Jesus is Lord of all. This Jesus that I follow, this Jesus that was crucified, this Jesus was right. This is God's way; this is God's intention; this is the embodiment of God's love, of God's grace. Jesus is Lord of all. Therefore, with fear and trembling, I will follow him. I'll take one step at a time, but I will follow Jesus because I have seen the Lord is risen. The Lord is risen, indeed." Easter happened when Peter thought he could get away by going home.

I have a good friend who celebrated his 80th birthday recently who chided me a little bit for forcing him to rethink some things theological, and he wrote a beautiful piece about in his 80th year, thanking God that he still has opportunity to repent of the narrowness and the exclusiveness of his faith journey and to begin to see brothers and sisters of every stripe as loved by God. Easter can happen even when you're 80, and when it happens, there's no going home.