

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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DON'T LOOK BACK

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John 21:1-19

Luke 9:57-62

In many ways, this last chapter of John's gospel is a bit of a P.S. John had worked up to a perfectly good conclusion at the end of what we call chapter 20. He had told of the resurrection, he had shown the disciples commissioned to go out with the message and given the Holy Spirit to enable them to do so, and he had told the purpose of his writing: "*These [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*" What a splendid way to finish. But something made him add this last chapter, maybe much later. Something made it important that people should know the story of Peter's commissioning, and perhaps quash the rumours that grew up that John would live until Jesus' return. So we get this P.S., and I am glad that we have it.

At the beginning of this incident we find the disciples at a loose end. Between the resurrection and Pentecost, they don't seem to have had much of an idea about how to go about fulfilling that commission Jesus gave them on Easter Sunday evening. They certainly didn't get right out there and begin to tell others. But at least now they have left their upper room, so maybe it is a step in the right direction. But what next? They have left Jerusalem and gone back to Galilee, where some at least came from. It was an uncertain time for them: would they see Jesus again, or had he gone for good? We know, with hindsight, that he was still around until his ascension, but they didn't know that there was to be an ascension, and Jesus was not with them in the same way that he had been before his death. He came and he went, and who could say where he went to, or when or if he would come again.

People don't do well with uncertainty, so maybe it is hardly surprising that Peter decided that he would go back to what he knew best, and go fishing. It is not surprising, but it could have been a crucial point in Peter's life and in the life of the other disciples. Peter was going back, back to what he knew, turning away from the uncertainty of discipleship, from not knowing what to do or how to do it, turning away from the fear of trying to do what Jesus commissioned his disciples to do. He was going back to the fish – they might not always bite, they might swim away from the boat at times, but he understood them, he had grown up imbibing the lore of how to work with them and make them work with you. He was going back: it is a natural human instinct.

It is a natural human instinct to look back to what is known instead of forward into the unknown. When the other six disciples present said that they would go with Peter, for at least two of them it was also a going back, and even for those who were not fishermen, it was an acknowledgement that it might not be possible to sustain the life of a disciple. So let's go back. Let's do what we have always done, what we know works for us. Let's get back into our comfort zone. Let's forget the hard things asked of us – going out, finding ways to communicate the news about Jesus, about

God's saving love, to people who don't get it, anyway. Yes, the good news might die out with us, but we don't know what else to do, we aren't strong or courageous enough to speak to others. Fish may swim away, but they don't reject you and they don't answer back.

Peter doesn't say so, but he is within an inch of turning his back on the past three years, incredible years, but years which are over and which have left him without a definite path to follow now. Now, when he gets up in the morning, he doesn't know what he should do to fill his day and fulfil God's purposes. Jesus has not given a blueprint of what a disciple's day should be like, from rising to resting. Of course he hasn't, because he knew his disciples were all different and that the situations in which they found themselves would all be individual as well, as the people to whom they went were different. Jesus spoke often in parables, not in directives, which is why it is sometimes harder to follow him – since this means that we have to work out for our own situations what his parables mean. It is easier for people to get a handle on what St. Paul teaches, because he was giving directives – but directives for specific early churches, and we have to remember that we live in a different place and time, and we still have to work out what his words mean for us. It is easier to go back to what Jesus' words have meant to past generations, or to how Paul's directives have been implemented in the past, but we are not called to live in the past, nor to build an unchanging edifice. We are called to bring the good news of God's love in Jesus to each new generation.

So, Peter says he is going fishing, and the other six say that they will come too. They did not mean to, but they were actually preventing that fishing bug from getting hold of Peter again. Seven men in a boat that was usually crewed by two? Seven men, some of whom knew little about fishing, all stumbling over each other in the dark? No wonder the fish weren't biting! They probably heard that boat coming a long way off! No one could have called it a good night's work. This was just as well. If Peter had come home with a huge catch, which represented a livelihood and a profit, he might have decided to follow the fish again. Sometimes we need a bit of failure to help us remember what our purpose is.

And then, they saw that figure on the shore who called out to them about their embarrassing lack of catch, who directed them to let down their nets on the right side of the boat, and so proved that he knew a lot more about the fish than the fishermen did. And something stirs in their minds, a memory of a similar event, when Jesus had been with them in the boat. And something clicks with John, and he cries out that it is the Lord! And Peter, the fisherman leaves the others to deal with the catch that was livelihood and profit and plunges in to the water, to reach Jesus. Perhaps this was Peter's moment of realisation, the moment when he saw what he was doing, when he saw the pull of the past which he was giving in to. Maybe this was when he realised that he couldn't move forward while looking backwards.

So, to the shore, and the discovery that Jesus didn't need these fish that they had just caught, as he had already provided their breakfast – of fish. And then that conversation with Jesus, when Peter had to say that he loved his Lord, when he was able to wipe out for good the shame of his denials, when he was able to say aloud that he loved Jesus "more than these." These fish. This past. These profits and security. These friends. They walked along the shore and Peter turned his back on the past for good. There comes a time for all of us when we have to have a similar conversation with Jesus, when we have to turn our backs on the past and look to the fu-

ture. When we have to give up the security of the known, and agree that to walk with Jesus into the unknown is better.

When Jesus was testing the commitment of would-be disciples, he was quite clear that looking back is not something he wants from those who follow him. “No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” To plough a straight furrow, as to leave a straight wake in a boat, you have to look ahead, look to the horizon and steer for that. You can’t always look back to see where you have been, to go over the mistakes you have made or take pride in the straight furrow behind you. The author to the Hebrews said that we should “Run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.”

How many churches are there, I wonder, especially in the West, which might rejoice too much in their history – whether of denomination or of congregation. How often do you go into a church when you are travelling and find that you can learn more about the congregation’s past than about its present and its future? We tell the history of where we have been well. To do so is not wrong in itself, but if it becomes how we think of ourselves, what we try to maintain, what we mainly focus on, then yes, it does become wrong. Churches are not museums, but living bodies, and we only live as we move forward.

Of course, it is easier to work to a template, received from the past and polished by constant use, but Jesus deliberately did not give his followers a template. He said, “Follow me” and “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And yes, we do have to work out over and over again what that means in every different place and for every succeeding generation. Just as Jesus looked for the people who needed him, and the people who were receptive to his message, and then he went to them, so we are called to find the people who need to know God’s love in word and deed, and the people who need to hear that they are chosen and special and beloved, and find ways to go to them.

“Feed my lambs,” said Jesus to Peter, “Tend my sheep...feed my sheep.” He still says it to us. Reach out to others, he says – use Rhyme Time, use Messy Church, use your involvement in community organisations, use all the ways you meet people, and look for new ways as well. Don’t go back to the fishing, the old ways; don’t look back. If we are to follow Jesus we must walk forwards, fixing our eyes on him, caring more for him and for the lost sheep he loves, than for our own convenience or security. It is a big ask, but discipleship always was a big ask. With God’s hand over ours on the plough-shaft, we can walk forward into the unknown future with confidence. Amen.