

April 12, 2020 (Easter Sunday)

"Running With Peter"

John 20:1-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-6, 12-19

In this very disjointed season of Lent and Holy Week, we have been focused on Walking With Peter as he walks with Jesus. We've seen this sometimes rock-like, sometimes weak-kneed leader go through ups and downs, successes and failures, brief moments of clarity followed by a lot of confusion about who Jesus is and where He is going. It turns out that Walking With Peter helps us realize we're not alone in our own struggles as followers of Jesus. Maybe for those who are unsure about surrendering their life to Jesus and choosing to walk with Him personally, Walking With Peter has helped you understand that nobody who follows Jesus gets it right all the time; or even most of the time. Only Jesus got it right all of the time, for us, and He invites all of us very flawed and very broken people to walk with Him.

But today, instead of walking with Peter, we are going to Run With Peter. [PRAYER]

Of all the cancelled sporting events during this pandemic, I think it's safe to bet that the most 'universally missed' event will be the summer Olympics in Tokyo. And of all the Olympic events, as wonderful and varied as they are, I'll bet that the most universally missed event/venue (or at least one of the top three most missed events/venues) will be track and field. And of all the track and field events, the most universally missed events will be the marathon and the relays – races of endurance on the one hand, strength and speed on the other. We all love a good race; and the closer everyone is at the finish line the better.

Peter and John race to the tomb. But wait . . . before THEY are off and running, Mary Magdalene (and maybe some other women mentioned in our other gospel accounts) is running. But she's racing from the empty tomb back to the disciples. And she's not talking about an empty tomb in a good way. As far as she's concerned, somebody "has taken the Lord." [By the way, the Church got no points back then for clarifying that women were the first witnesses of an empty tomb.] Upon hearing from the women, Peter and John kick it into high gear. [Cue "Chariots of Fire" music.] The race is on! These two high-testosterone, overly-competitive young men – we know they are still young because there is no mention of sore knees or pulled hamstrings – [they] are in a dead sprint; neck-and-neck until John, who wrote the account, pulls ahead for good and crosses the finish line. But John doesn't go into the tomb. He just peeks in and notices the linens that had been wrapped around Jesus' body. Peter, the silver medalist, arrives shortly after John and tries to gloss over the fact that he's been defeated. He does what he is so good at – barges in like a bull in a china shop to be first INSIDE the tomb. He notices the strips of linen too; but the text says he also sees the head cloth – folded up in another spot.

John comes in and joins Peter, no doubt congratulating him for his second place finish. And then the two of them just stare. They see, but they don't know what to make of it. It's clear Jesus' body is gone, but they are confused as to what that means. And then it clicks with John; again, John gets first place. He "believes." He gets it! He has clarity! Jesus is Risen!

N.T. Wright describes what that moment of seeing AND believing must have been like. He says, "[John] remembers that moment ever afterwards. A different sensation. A bit like falling in love; a bit like sunrise; a bit like the sound of rain at the end of a long drought. A bit like faith. Oh, [John] had had faith before. He had believed that Jesus was the Messiah. He had believed that God had sent Jesus, that Jesus was God's man for God's people and God's world. But this was different. 'He saw *and believed*.' " There is seeing . . . and there is believing. And, can we say(?), there is believing (As in saying the Apostle's Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty . . . the resurrection of the dead") and there is BELIEVING! John BELIEVES! So does Mary.

Our passage includes the encounter Mary Magdalene has with Jesus. Again, we see someone go from confusion to clarity. She thinks He is the gardener: "Do you know where they put His body, sir?" But then she sees Him clearly when He calls her by her name. "Mary!". And she calls Him by name. "Rabbi! Jesus . . . it's You! You're alive!" Mary is the only one in our resurrection accounts that gets a one-on-one with Jesus. The first eyewitnesses to an empty tomb: a woman/women. The first actual encounter with the risen Jesus: a woman. If you think about it, Mary Magdalene is the first apostle (or sent one) to the apostles. She doesn't get the same kind of press Peter does, but it's a great reminder that The Church is always more than its few prominent leaders. **[Again, the fact that any of our gospel writers included women as eyewitnesses gained no brownie points for believability among the first hearers. According to Luke's resurrection account, the disciples themselves didn't even believe the women. [See Luke 24:11.] I share that to bolster our faith that this is reliable testimony. If they were making stuff up, they wouldn't have come up with this! You can do more than believe this. You can BELIEVE it!]**

But what about Peter? Do we still have some more Walking to do With Him? We will get to see next week in John 21 that he has a heart-to-heart with Jesus on the shores of Galilee. He gets reinstated and redirected, and it's one of my absolute favorite stories in all of scripture. But there are two other interesting verses that have had me thinking for a long time. Truth is, I've never really chosen to explore them much. Maybe it took a whole sermon series on Peter to finally look more closely at these somewhat obscure passages. One comes from our opening scripture that we tend to use every Easter as a sort of Call to Worship/Profession of Faith. Paul writes, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve." (1 Corinthians 15:3-5)

Huh. "He appeared to Peter"? When was that? Where was that? A second passage that gets dropped into Luke's gospel comes in chapter 24 when the two men who, unbeknownst to them, walk with the Risen Jesus, but don't see Him. They are confused. Finally, Jesus makes Himself known to them that evening while breaking bread. Clarity. The minute they realize it's Jesus, He disappears; and they go RUNNING back the 7 miles or so to tell the others. This is what Luke records, "They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together saying 'It's true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.' " (Luke 24:33-34) The Risen Jesus "appeared to Simon"? Huh? When was that? Where was that? And more importantly, what was that like . . . for Peter?

We have no record of that account; that one-on-one. Many have surmised that the once-bold-and-somewhat-arrogant Peter was so humbled by his denial of Jesus that he made sure he didn't get his name in lights with a special resurrection encounter like Mary Magdalene got – and, he would say, deserved. She was fully devoted to the end; he was not. We'll never know what that encounter with just Jesus and Peter was like. But we know the difference it made. Peter really became The Rock that Jesus declared him to be long before he could ever see it himself.

I'm not saying from this point on that Peter always got it right. We'll see next week in John 21 Peter's still a little too worried about John; he didn't want to get beaten by John again. Peter still needs to be filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 before he finds his preaching legs, and voice. He needs a supernatural vision on the rooftop in Acts 10 to fully realize Jesus came for Jews AND Gentiles; that the Church ought to let go of some of its Jewish-ness to be true to its mission. Paul still has to call Peter on the carpet for being two-faced in Antioch because he's fine hanging out with Gentiles until some of his Jewish buddies come to town and he kicks into "pleaser mode."

What I am saying is that the old Peter – the 'getting-it-wrong-more-often-than-not' Peter; the 'impulsive-and-not-afraid-to-speak-out-or-step-out-and-step-in-it' Peter; the guy who was sure he was right only to be proved wrong; the guy who swore he would never turn away from Jesus but went so far as to say, "I don't know the man!" – [that old Peter] was a changed man because he encountered the Risen Jesus. He was a different kind of leader. He had much more clarity. He was committed and courageous. He had a deep reservoir of faith to draw from. And he was filled with hope instead of despair.

Years after his encounter with the Risen Jesus, whatever that moment was like, Peter wrote a couple letters addressed to Christians who were scattered and persecuted. This large scale persecution would lead to his own suffering and death; his own "taking up the cross and following Jesus." (Matthew 16:24-25) Here's how he started off his first letter in the midst of that suffering: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a LIVING HOPE through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the

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dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you." (1 Peter 1:3-4) New birth . . . into a LIVING HOPE.

Does anyone need some LIVING HOPE that will never spoil or fade?

This virus is spoiling so much: our graduations and weddings and vacations and freedom to hang out with the people we want to hang out with. We're not having Easter together! We're losing jobs! We're scared and stockpiling and – for some – losing hope. Most of us can say with conviction that 'this too will pass.' But then what? If it's not a virus that gets you and me at some point down the road, all of us will get to the eventual end of our lives on this planet. I'll do some of your funerals. And some pastor down the road will do more of yours. [By the way, parents. I know this is hard and you're having frustrating moments with your kids. But, trust me, someday – when they gather with a pastor to plan your service and tell stories about your life – they might talk about how great the 'shelter-in-place' of 2020 was . . . because YOU made it great.]

So about that end of your life and end of my life . . . what will we be hoping for then?

We will be hoping that all this is true. That Jesus really did defeat sin and death and rise from the grave, leaving His wrappings behind and appearing to Mary . . . then Peter . . . then so many others . . . even 500 at one time.

Because if all this is true, we can have a living hope (because of the resurrection), we can be a person, like Peter – someone who gets it right, gets it wrong, sees it clearly then gets confused, stands strong then buckles at the knees, makes promises and breaks them – who, somehow, along the way gets transformed and changed into a person who Walks With Jesus . . . transformed into a person who comes to the end of our life with a Living Hope . . . in a Living Lord.

May you, this Easter and always, have a LIVING HOPE.

***Please listen to "Living Hope" by Phil Wickham.