

## “The Never-Ending Story”

John 21:1-17

April 26, 2020

We thought the gospel had ended. John’s Gospel, that is. The last two verses of chapter twenty, last week’s reading, appear to bring the story to a tidy conclusion, reminding us that Jesus did many other signs that could not be recorded in this book, imploring us to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and receive the life he offers. After that, we expect to see the words, “The End,” scroll across the screen. Instead, we find the words: “After these things, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples...” and another chapter begins, awkwardly positioned *after* the conclusion.

Awkward as it is, though, I’m convinced that this story has much to offer to those of us who intend to live faithfully and the church seeking to serve its deepest purpose in this new world in which we find ourselves. The very existence of another resurrection appearance reminds us that gospels do not end the way novels and movies do. As one preacher writes, “it is deeply satisfying to get to the end of a detective novel or a romantic comedy and have the sense that closure has been achieved—the crime has been solved, the couple has found true love—partly because we have to live in a world of constant disruption where closure never really happens.”<sup>1</sup> If you’ve been bingeing what we in our house call “safe” shows or movies these days, you recognize the longing for neat endings and secure closure in a time of disruption.

I think this resembles the posture of the seven disciples we meet at the beginning of John 21. For three years, they have walked the road of ministry with Jesus. They have seen miracles and heard stories of the world turned upside down. Their lives have been transformed by an encounter with God. They left it all behind to follow Jesus. But now, after the cross and the empty tomb, after all that has happened to this group of friends, the sense of expectation and adventure

seems to have faded. We find that these fishermen turned disciples have reverted to their former identity, their comfort zone. “I’m going fishing,” Peter says, and the rest agree that it is a good idea. The adventure is over. Back to the boats. Time to fish.

It is at this point that the conclusion is disrupted in a dramatic way. The resurrected Jesus appears on the beach with charcoal fire and a breakfast of bread and fish. Both of these details have relevance in John’s story. The last time we saw a charcoal fire Peter was warming his hands while denying his identity as a disciple in the courtyard of the High Priest. The last time we saw bread and fish, five thousand people were fed in an impromptu picnic. These symbols reappear as the story continues. The message is clear. We were wrong to assume that the gospel had ended, not because there is one more chapter, but because the story of God’s love for the world will never be over. Gospels do not end. The work of the church must continue.

And so, Peter, representing us all, has one more encounter with the Risen Christ. In this simple exchange, we can find the church’s mission and our purpose. “Do you love me? Feed my sheep.” “Do you love me? Tend my lambs.” In the courtyard of the High Priest the night of Jesus’ trial, Peter had rejected his vocation and call. “*Are you one of his disciples?*” “*I am not.*” Here, Jesus reaffirms Peter’s identity in this never-ending story of the Gospel.

It is a commissioning moment. It is a call to action and discipleship. It is an invitation to write the next chapter of our faith. It is the Gospel imperative in a nutshell: “If you love me, feed my sheep.” “If you love me, tend my lambs.”

As you would likely guess, I have been spending a lot of time these weeks talking, listening, thinking,

praying, and Zooming about the role of the church in the emerging new chapter of our life together. Everyone with whom I talk seems certain that significant change is inevitable, but when we get to specifics the certainty disappears. We must admit, I think, that we have very little idea what lies ahead and when it will come. Like Peter eating his breakfast on the beach with Jesus, we could never predict the future and we certainly cannot see it right now.

And yet, in spite of our uncertainty and limited vision we, like Peter, have had an encounter with the Risen Christ. In the never-ending story that is the Gospel, Jesus now empowers and compels Peter, and *us*, to take on this extraordinary mission. Like Peter, we did not get to choose the circumstances of our lives or the moment in which we now live. But here, in the final account of his life that John gives us, Jesus shows up on the shore, hosts one more meal for his disciples, tells Peter, and tells us, “I believe in you. I love you. And you are the ones this world needs now. Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs.”

What might it look like in this difficult time of disruption? Before and beyond anything else, our mission must begin with love. “*Do you love me?*” He asks. And, with Peter, we respond with confidence—“yes, Lord, you know that we love you.” In this encounter, we are reminded that the mission of the church in every age must flow from our love for Christ into our love for one another—beginning with those closest to us, those lambs entrusted to our care. Last night, while folding towels after the boys were in bed, I asked my favorite preacher how she would preach this text this morning. Sara said, “I would tell them the story of Ben’s prayer at dinner tonight.” We were about to dig into our hot dogs, mac and cheese, and applesauce, when our three-year-old stopped us and said, “I want to say that one where we put people in our heart.” Sara had taught us all a prayer practice in which you open your hand, close your eyes, and call to mind someone you love who is close to your heart. When that person emerges, you close your hand and bring it to your heart, placing this beloved person in your heart and God’s heart as well. It is an

act of prayer that overcomes the distance separating us from loved ones. Ben began with Miss Chloe, one of his teachers and a great friend who he loves so much. Then he said, “And, I will put Jesus in my heart because I love him.”

Friends, whatever path we as God’s people in the world will pursue whatever the next chapter in this story will be, it must begin with love. Sara reminded me last night that the question Jesus asks Peter is an incredibly intimate one. “Do you love me?” All ministry, all acts of compassion, all deeds of service, all words of faith, must begin in this simple and powerful way.

And then, we must feed God’s sheep. We must carry forward the ministry of Jesus, his loving actions, his courageous words. In this way, the church is uniquely equipped and called to provide leadership in times of crisis. One of you sent me a column this week that included these words, “In my view, trust is the only legal performance-enhancing drug. Whenever there is more trust in a company, country, or community, good things happen.”

I think that’s right—trust is the currency of visionary leadership no matter the arena. But there are also some peculiarities to leadership from the Christian perspective. The benchmarks, goals, and standards are different. At its best, the church does not seek to accumulate power. We distribute compassion. At its best, the church does not obsess over the bottom line but those who are left behind. Our message to the world is not one of self-promotion but selfless service. Sacrificing our convenience for another’s survival. Feeding God’s sheep with tenderness and comfort.

Peter might have thought that his story was over when he denied his identity on that tragic night. But it was only the turning of a page. The same, I believe, is true for each of us and for people of Christian faith together. A new chapter lies ahead of us. It is a time that begs for leadership from those who are guided by values of selflessness and love. The question is this—will we embrace our identity and seize this moment? Will we choose to be defined by our faith or by our

fears? Will we build trust and lead with integrity, or will we allow ourselves to become divided and distracted, denying our unique call?

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, tells his disciples—“I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” We love him, his purpose must be our mission. Life abundant for all of God’s sheep, all of God’s beloved children.

A few weeks ago, I received an email from one of our members who volunteers in the food pantry. She wanted to share a story with me. Here’s what she wrote: “Yesterday I picked up a food pantry donation from the 96th St. Starbucks. They give regularly to the pantry, but today they are closing that store for a few weeks, and so they emptied their refrigerator into the back of my car. We loaded 77 gallons of milk! Shortly afterward, we passed out every single gallon to the pantry guests waiting in their cars to receive their drive-through groceries in the church parking lot. As we did, I heard cheers from the backseats of those cars! Doesn’t God provide in the most wonderful ways? So many people who weren’t able to make it before without help are really struggling now. Please keep them in your prayers.”

In the weeks since I read that email, the sound of children cheering for a gallon of milk has not left my mind. I hear it every time I pour my own sons a glass of milk, every time I reach into our well-stocked refrigerator, every time I unload another bag of groceries. What does Christian leadership look like now? I’ll tell you. It looks like putting the love of Jesus Christ into our hearts. It looks like compassion extended beyond our own tribe. It looks like refusing to accept a reality in which those without enough are forgotten, left behind, or demonized. It looks like a gallon of milk offered along with a word of hope.

Called to love. Called to serve. Called to lead. Called to offer our unique and powerful voice to the next chapter of God’s story of redemption and love for all the world. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, “Easter – The Extra Scenes?” in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2010, p. 32.