

*Looking Death in the Eye**

John 21: 1-19

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Edward Bloom, the central character in the movie, *Big Fish* (directed by Tim Burton) is a man who delights in telling stories. The stories that Bloom relates about his life and his adventures are fantastic. They are mythic. Each night, sitting on the edge of his son's bed, Bloom describes his encounters with extraordinary creatures. He tells of making friends with a giant. He explains what it is like to work for a werewolf. In his son's favorite bedtime story, Bloom recalls a youthful expedition to a broken-down house in the midst of a nearby swamp.

The story goes like this: One night when Edward was only ten years old, he and four curious friends hiked into a swamp seeking a ramshackle, vine-covered home and hoping to get a peek at the house's occupant—an old woman who was reputed to be a witch. It is only when they are crouched in the undergrowth—peering at the eerie house—that one of the young friends informs the others of rumors regarding the witch's menacing, mystical glass eye. They say, he tells his companions, that if you look right at her awful glass eye, “you can see how you're gonna die.”¹ Quivering at the horror of such a possibility, the friends begin to dare each other to approach the house and knock at the door. It is a hard sell, though. For these youths are clear that they are not at all interested in catching a glimpse of their demise in a witch's enchanted eye.

How many of us would react with fear if we were faced with the possibility of viewing our own death? To glimpse that sight—to watch a film-clip of our final breathing moments—seems so very threatening. No doubt, we too would run from the spectacle. It *is* frightening to imagine what our final scene will look like. Will I die gracefully? Awkwardly? Tragically? When death comes for me. . . Will I be alone? Or surrounded by loved ones? Will I die unexpectedly with countless items left on my to-do lists? Or will I die at peace—satisfied with this life? These are tough questions. Can a person possibly cope with a peek at the answers? Perhaps death is best left as a surprise. For if we *were* to witness our end—our concluding act on earth—it might disturb our whole approach to life. Yes, of course, we know that we are all going to die some day, but we don't live each day with pictures of our final, fated moments propped up next to our computer screens or taped to our dashboards. Something like that could seriously mess a person up. Our choices—our day-to-day decisions—depend on our forgetting that we are finite. Don't they? What do you think? If you were offered the opportunity to see the moment of your own death would you look?

At the conclusion of the Gospel of John, standing on a beach at sunrise, the Risen Christ speaks an oddly somber proverb to Peter. “Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around

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you and take you where you do not wish to go.” What a strange thing to say—so strange, in fact, that the gospel writer feels compelled to explain this pronouncement. Elbowing readers in the side, John writes that Jesus has uttered these sober words *to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God*. Oh, really? Does that clarify things? After all, Peter has just finished confessing his love for Jesus, not once, but three times. We expect the Christ to respond in kind. Yet, instead of tender mercies, Jesus looks at the big fisherman and soberly forecasts Peter’s death.

Of course, on the surface, Jesus’ proverb speaks not about death, but about another frightening possibility—loss of control. It is a cultural given that we want control over our destinies, our finances, our schedules, our emotions. We want the remote control. As we grow older, one of the most frightening things that we can contemplate is loss of control. Will I lose control of my body, my choices, and even my thoughts? Will I be able to dress myself? And drive my car? Or will someone else be fastening a belt around me, and taking me places I don’t want to go? We face these issues on a corporate level, too. What is happening to our denomination? We are losing members, losing churches. Are we also losing influence in the world? Is Presbyterianism, is mainline religion, a dying thing? What can we do to save the church? And oblivious to our anxiety, or worse, fanning its flames, Jesus tells Peter, the rock on which the church was to be built, that his fate is to lose control. What a strange choice of parting words to speak to a dear friend. Is that what we can expect from God? If we confess our devotion to the Resurrected One will he also look us in the eye and promise that our destiny is to be taken places where we do not want to go?

To answer we need to go back to the beginning of the story. John’s Gospel summons us back to the Sea of Galilee. There we find the disciples in an anxious huddle. What will become of them? Jesus is gone. What should they do with their lives now? Then, standing alongside the lake that had once been the answer to all of these questions, Peter declares, “I am going fishing.” The other disciples, eager for anything that might break the mood, toss their tunics on the sand and declare that they are going with him. So they return to the boat—to the baiting of hooks, the casting of nets, to the very thing that put bread on the table before they were called—before they were summoned to follow a holy man who went and got himself executed. In a way they were back to square one, back to something that they knew—the familiar rhythms of fishing.

But how familiar was it? They weren’t catching anything. Perhaps their old skills had turned rusty. Or maybe the fish had simply gone deep. Whatever the case, on this night their nets were unlucky sieves that could strain nothing but gloom from the black waters. Then, at daybreak, just as they were about to pack it in, a stranger appears on the shore—a man who acts like he has fished these waters before, because immediately he starts dispensing advice. Why don’t you throw your nets on the other side of the boat? Why not? And this time the strands of rope mesh grow taut. The men’s muscles bulge. Fish. So many fish. The stranger’s counsel has turned their excursion from emptiness to bounty, from futility to abundance. With this abrupt change comes perspective—an epiphany. “It’s the Lord,” says one. And at that announcement, Peter abandons ship—swimming for shore and his Savior.

When he eventually wades onto the beach, the soaked disciple finds Jesus tending a charcoal fire. His teacher has prepared breakfast. It’s like old times—here they are together again sharing a meal. Yet, something is different. For after serving fish and

bread to the hungry men, Jesus turns to Peter and asks something he has never asked the disciple before, “Simon, Son of John, do you love me?” Quickly, as if he was desperately hoping for such an opportunity, Peter responds, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” To which Jesus replies, “Feed my lambs.” Many see in Peter’s declaration of love a chance for the fisherman to refute the denials that he uttered during the arrest and trial of Jesus. Of course, Peter had looked death in the eye before. He had faced soldiers probing his connection to the arrested traitor, Jesus. He had faced the prospect of his own demise—and he had fled from it in fear.

Fear hangs in the air as young Edward finally accepts his friends’ dare and approaches the house in the swamp. We watch as he softly pads across the porch. Then suddenly, the front door snaps open revealing an old woman with snarled hair and a patch over her left eye. “Ma’am,” says the startled boy, “my name is Edward Bloom, and there’s some folks here who’d like to see your eye.” With that he leads the woman back to their hiding spot, where only two of his companions remain—Zachy and Don Price, brothers. The others have fled. As the old woman emerges from shadows behind Edward, she stares at the brothers. . . and then flips up her eye patch. A flashlight beam illumines her mysterious eye, and the film cuts away to show us what the paralyzed Zachy sees. An old man, Zachy is standing on a wobbly stepladder, changing a light bulb. Suddenly, the ladder gives way and he falls. Dead. Trembling with fear (for Don has seen his death, too), the two brothers bolt from the underbrush and flee into swamp.

Edward, however, has not gazed at the eye. He could leave without looking back, but curiosity gets the better of him. So he says to the woman, “I was thinking about death and all. About seeing how you’re gonna die. I mean, on one hand, if dying was all you thought about, it could kind of screw you up. But it could kind of help you, couldn’t it? Because you’d know that everything else you can survive.”²

“It could kind of help you,” says the boy. Wise words. Courageous words too. In fact, these words may explain why Jesus’ last gift for Peter is a vision of his own death. Peter—strong, reliable Peter—has been overcome by fear. He has denied his beloved teacher. He has cut himself off from a joy that once fueled his every waking moment. Certainly, Jesus must sense his disciple’s profound pain. Yet instead of offering the fisherman a psychological band-aid—instead of simply saying, listen don’t worry about denying me—no big thing, he honors Peter by wading into the deep waters with him. He describes Peter’s death. Not to scare him. Oh no. Quite the contrary. Jesus tells Peter about his death to restore him to life.

Looking at Edward Bloom, the old woman smiles, a crooked grin of broken teeth, and turns her head so that “the eye” faces the boy. This time the director doesn’t cut away. We do not see what Edward sees. Instead, we watch his unruffled face as he witnesses his death. He stares transfixed. And then, with a smile, he says, “Huh. So, that’s how I go.” Concluding the story, a grown Edward says to his young son, “From that moment on, I no longer feared death.”

After Jesus tells Peter about his death—after Peter smiles and thinks, “Huh, so that’s how I go”—the Christ speaks two simple words: “Follow me.” It is a challenge that Peter has accepted before, and one he will keep accepting until he breathes his last. For when fear has been vanquished, following, gutsy, world-changing following, becomes possible.

Reflecting on Christian hope, our friend Shirley Guthrie wrote, “God in Christ

stands at the end of the life of every individual person. In the last analysis that is all we know and all we need to know.”³ Perhaps this is the hope that Jesus offers to Peter: a promise that the most solitary thing that we can do—die—is not something that we do alone. Isn’t that what the story of the resurrection is all about?

I wonder: Are we brave enough to look into the eye of wisdom and see reflected there what the Resurrected One has prepared for us? Of course, it would be frightening to see ourselves toppling from ladders and exhaling final breaths in hospital beds. Perhaps, though, if we were to peer into God’s great glass eye we would see something altogether different, something that would surprise us, something that would give us courage—like a charcoal fire on a beach and a few trout being grilled by our dearest friend.

Notes

1. John August, *Big Fish: The Shooting Script*, screenplay. Based on the novel by Daniel Wallace (New York: Newmarket Press, 2004), 13.
2. Ibid., 26.
3. Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* rev. ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 385.