

Easter People Discipleship

Acts 9:36-43

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In the beach story from John 21, we learn that even after Peter saw the risen Jesus two times, he still made the monumental decision to go back to what was familiar—fishing. At that moment in his life, living as a part of God’s new creation felt too daunting for Peter. Proclaiming Jesus dead and risen was too risky.

It is one thing to claim being a disciple of Jesus, but it is something else entirely to change your whole life because of it: to change how you make decisions or spend your time. So rather than make all those dramatic shifts, Peter went back to what he knew—fishing—and he took many of the other disciples with him. But then, as you recall, Jesus messed Peter’s normality all up. Jesus appeared on the beach and gave him another shot. He redeemed Peter once and for all, showing Peter that he did not need to be afraid of his calling to live as a disciple. He did not need to be afraid of living as an Easter person. And that third resurrection visit must have made the difference because Jesus’ words finally took root in Peter’s heart.

“Do you love me, Peter?” Jesus kept asking him. “Then feed my sheep. Tend my sheep. Live your faith.” And at last, Peter stepped fully into who God hoped he would be. He took his call seriously—the call to live out his discipleship, to show Christ’s love in every aspect of his life.

And that brings us to this text from the Book of Acts. Immediately before our particular story about Peter and Tabitha, we read that Peter was going from here to there among all the people, teaching, preaching, and healing all in the name of his risen Lord, Jesus the Christ. He wasn’t fishing any longer. He wasn’t hiding behind closed doors anymore. He wasn’t denying who he was—a follower of God in the way of Jesus. Rather, Peter finally let Jesus’ invitation to newness soak deeply into his soul. And in response to that soaking, Peter dove right into ministry.

According to Acts, the Spirit had clearly taken hold of Peter. And in response to the Spirit’s claim on him, Peter lived out his discipleship by loving God, tending to God’s wounded, and feeding the hungry with the Gospel. With his life, in just about everything he did, Peter re-presented Christ to his world.

In today’s story, we see a small snippet of Peter’s travels. As he went around and word got out about his ministry, two men found him and asked him to travel to Joppa because a female disciple named Tabitha had died. Now, let us pause for a moment. It is imperative that we notice that something new is happening in this Joppa experience. This is the only time in the entire New Testament that you will find the feminine form of the Greek word *disciple*.

We infer from this that the writer of Luke/Acts felt it was critical to demonstrate that even before Peter arrived in Joppa, God’s Spirit was already at work stirring things up and creating new possibilities. This is what happens throughout the book of Acts. And here, we are shown that *women* could be disciples too. Furthermore, we realize that this female disciple named Tabitha was such a significant part of her community that when she died, two men came to get Peter and bring him to her house.

And after Peter listened to the widows tell him how powerfully Tabitha had cared for them throughout her life, he asked everyone to step out of the room. Peter knelt down and abandoned himself to God's power at work within him. He prayed. Then he told Tabitha to get up. And she did. The healing power of God's Spirit worked through a willing Peter to create new possibilities. This time new possibilities for Tabitha.

Yet Tabitha's healing was not simply for her alone. God's healing is never only for the individual affected. In Scripture, God's healing always ripples out into the larger community, healing others with the fresh possibilities of the Gospel as they hear the stories of how God is at work in their world. And that is exactly what happened in Joppa. Tabitha's healing meant the widows would have their caregiver again. But in addition to that life-sustaining gift, word of what God had done spread throughout the land. As the writer of Luke/Acts succinctly puts it, "Many people believed in the Lord."

Peter, however, did not linger. He went back to work, continuing to go here and there, refusing to stop. His encounter on the beach with the risen Jesus had planted in Peter the conviction that being a disciple, living out his baptism, included more than claiming Christianity as his religion. Peter realized that his faith was to be, as Catholic mystic Richard Rohr wrote, "not [only] an affirmation of a creed, [or] an intellectual acceptance of God, or believing certain doctrines to be true or orthodox, although those things might well be good."

Rather, through his three-question encounter with Jesus, Peter learned that his profession of faith, his declaration of trust in God, was only the very beginning of his discipleship journey. In that third encounter with Jesus, Peter discovered that to be a Christian, a follower of God in the way of Jesus, meant he was now sent into the world on Jesus' behalf, to go here and there, to love God, to tend to God's wounded, and to feed the hungry with the Gospel.

And we could go on and on, following Peter as he went here and there. For again, Jesus had convinced Peter with the crazy idea that being his disciple meant much more than only an intellectual acceptance or creedal assent or orthodox belief. His discipleship did not consist of claiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior but then picking up his rod to go back to fishing again. He could not say, "I believe, help thou my unbelief" but then immediately move away from the riskiness of the Gospel to go back into the comfort of the old order, pre-Easter.

Peter had discovered that his discipleship could not end with getting his spiritual needs met on Sunday so that he could feel good the rest of the week. While being nourished in his faith was crucial, his discipleship required more of him than being self-absorbed. Through his encounter with Jesus on the beach, Peter learned that living as a disciple was not a spectator sport.

God called him to re-present Christ to the world with the totality of his life. He was to re-present Christ in all the decisions that he made about how to spend his money and his time; in the ways he interacted with others, particularly those who lived on the margins of power like Tabitha and those widows; in the ways he spoke about others, especially those with whom he disagreed as he and the Apostle Paul would frequently do. Re-presenting Christ formed the marching orders on what it meant to be a disciple in God's Easter world.

But re-presenting Christ in the world was not only Peter's calling. Peter could

not do it by himself. Re-presenting Christ was and is the church's calling too. And Peter knew that. He was intimately tied to his community of faith—the church. He had come to realize that one cannot be a Christian, a disciple, by him/herself. To be a Christian means to immediately be called into being a part of the body of Christ and to live that discipleship out in a local congregation or worshiping community.

Yet for many of us post-modern day disciples, that call into participation, into involvement, into living out Christ's love in every aspect of our lives, can be difficult to remember. In our culture it still remains challenging not to view the church as we do so many other institutions—as a vendor with goods we consume. It is a challenge not to view the clergy as the church's sales representatives or to talk about evangelism as marketing. When we see our discipleship primarily through that lens, we will come every few weeks to sit in the pew during worship, hoping that the sermon will be spiritually stimulating and intellectually challenging, the music familiar and easily sung, and the prayers short, so that we do not go over our hour time limit. But sisters and brothers, if this becomes our primary way of thinking about our discipleship, then we miss something crucial. We miss a vital part of Peter's testimony to us.

If we approach our discipleship from the perspective of being consumers or spectators, thinking that what happens here on a Sunday really has nothing to do with who I am on a Wednesday, approaching our faith primarily as an interesting intellectual exercise to doubt or to affirm, then we miss our invitation to do what Peter did. We miss the fullness and excitement of our calling to *be* the body of Christ. Not to speak of it, but to *be* it. We miss our God-given challenge to re-present Christ in the world. Peter was not the only one God called to be fully engaged in living out the Gospel. Tabitha was not the only one God called to be a force of healing and care in her community. God has called every single one of us to follow in Peter's and in Tabitha's footsteps. God has called every single one of us to live and embody the Good News of grace and freedom in Christ.

The clergy are not the only ones whom God has called to re-present Christ in the world. As my seminary professor always reminded us, we clergy are merely paid Christians. All of us are challenged by God to live out our discipleship with the totality of our lives. All of us are invited to be more than spectators to or consumers of the Gospel. We are *all* called to re-present Christ in the world—both as individuals and as a particular faith community.

Now, not all of us are called to be Peter, going here and there. But as disciples, followers of God in the way of Jesus, we are all called to re-present Christ. And how we do that—the options are unlimited. Our responses may be small and personal—calling someone you have not seen in a while in church or in the fellowship hour, saying hello to someone you have not met before, treating those who sit on the corners outside the church with dignity and respect, learning names and stories. Our responses may be more public—saying yes to serving as an officer or teaching an academy class, using your vacation to go to Cuba or Guatemala for a partnership trip, volunteering to help with Sunday night supper or tutoring.

Our responses may be bold—getting involved with the interfaith coalition against racism, agitating on behalf of people who get left behind in the wake of progress, paying attention to and participating in public advocacy efforts to push for jobs and opportunity to come to all neighborhoods so that all people can imagine a future, being in hard conversations about how we, as a congregation, might join with other

congregations in trying to be “repairers of the breach” between police agencies and the communities they serve.

How you will respond to your calling to be a disciple with the totality of your life is between you and God. We, as a church, will stand with you and beside you as you discern your response. But make no mistake about it—there must be a response. Like Peter and like Tabitha, you are called to re-present Christ in the world. You are called to be more than a spectator or a consumer of the faith. You are called not simply to be satisfied with getting your own spiritual needs met or your own mind stretched and challenged without asking the “now what” questions with your life, with your time, with your resources. Being disciples is who we have been created to be in every moment, in all our decisions, in the way we see each other, in the way we view our lives. And I trust with everything I have got that the Spirit can and will move through us and work through us, creating new possibilities in our own congregations, in our own cities, for life and healing, for Easter newness.

Through his interactions with Jesus, Peter learned that living as a disciple involves far more than our intellectual assent or our small decisions for Jesus. Living as a disciple involves loving God, tending to God’s wounded, and feeding the hungry with the Gospel. Here is how John Calvin put it: “The Gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue but of life. It cannot be grasped by reason and memory only but is fully understood when it possesses the whole soul and penetrates to the inner recesses of the heart.... Our religion (discipleship) will be unprofitable if it does not change our heart, pervade our manners, and transform us into new creatures.”

Indeed. So what does that look like in your life? Friends, let us not just go back to fishing—to what is normal or comfortable for us. Let us choose to fully live out our discipleship, to re-present Christ to one another and to our world with courage, tenacity, and the hope-filled boldness that God’s Spirit will give. Can you imagine what God might do with all that? May it be so.