
Safe at Home

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A Sermon by the Rev. Bill Harkins
Pentecost 11

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen. Good morning and welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip on this 11th Sunday after Pentecost. What a difference a week can make! Last Sunday's Gospel found Peter answering for the disciples, and for us, when he said that Jesus was much more than people were claiming him to be—that he was the Messiah. Jesus affirmed Peter and the disciples, and told Peter that he was the rock upon which he, Jesus, would build his church. We rejoiced with Peter in this affirmation, and we delighted in hearing confirmed what we need so often to be reminded of—that the church is the very body of Christ.

Today, however, is not such a positive, feel-good experience. Today, we hear Jesus telling Peter and the disciples about the true cost of discipleship. ***"You are right in saying that I am the Messiah, but since I am, I must go to Jerusalem where I will be rejected, and endure suffering and death, and after three days rise again."*** Peter characteristically took Jesus aside, and said, in effect, "This can't be, this must never happen to you." I love this about Peter, who is so often so wonderfully human and here, is over-functioning in his role, and being a good but misguided example of the very rock Jesus described him last week to be. Being a rock, however, can have a shadow side. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it is almost an indication of our growing edges—those places where we have some work to do in becoming a whole person.

Peter's insight in the *previous* passage about who Jesus really was actually prompts today's next theological step. I find myself wondering what was going through Peter's mind in this exchange. Did he actually hear, in his understandable consternation, the end of Jesus' sentence, that Jesus would be raised on the third day? Or, was the idea of resurrection simply outside the bounds of imagination for Peter. Either way, I identify with Peter. How often do I hear only what I want to hear, and how often have I struggled on my faith journey with wrapping my mind and heart around the true meaning of resurrection? Peter typifies in this passage the challenge and cost of discipleship then, and now.

Another way in which I identify with Peter is that he wanted more control than he could have, and power he could not ultimately enforce. Jesus had just given Peter power, and he immediately misused it. In the process he demonstrated that he had not yet really understood what Jesus was all about. And by extension, he did not really understand his own journey, and that of the disciples. I get that, I've done that, and even as I appreciate Peter's human-ness, I fear that this is a story which will not end well. Or will it? And, come to that, what does it really mean, theologically speaking, for this story to end well? Does it mean who wins, who is more powerful? And if so, what and how do they win? So much in our culture these days is about who wins and who loses, who is in and who is out, who belongs, and who is alien, who is the other ... who is the stranger. And, like Peter, I am often at risk of claiming more about God than I can really know, thereby robbing myself, others, and God of the deep mystery at the heart of the Resurrection.

What happened next is startling, and disruptive and dis-closive of last week's happy story. Jesus gets angry—and I mean really, angry. And this anger serves a surprising purpose. For those of you who remember your art history, the Italian renaissance painter Giotto was the first artist to break with the Byzantine style of his time. In so doing, he began to provide depth and a three-dimensional background to his paintings. Giotto in his work began to show the world a new,

revolutionary way of painting. In this passage from Matthew Jesus is doing the same thing. As he *"began to show"* his disciples that suffering and death awaited him in Jerusalem, he is "filling in" the narrative from last week by providing Peter and the disciples the background, depth, and dimensionality of the story. And in the background, the Paschal mystery informs events as they unfold in these passages, from this moment on.

I love the phrase, **"From that time on,"** which begins today's Gospel because it connects Jesus' messiah-ship with redemption, resurrection, and atonement. And this has not been a matter of "chronos" or "clock time," but rather about "Kairos" or God's time, the time of the Holy Spirit. We recall that when his mother tells him at Cana of Galilee that he needs to help with the dwindling supply wine, Jesus tries to beg off, telling her "my hour has not yet come." His own brothers and sisters are skeptical of his words and deeds, and want him to go the Festival of Booths to further publicize his ministry in Judea. Jesus tells them, "my time has not yet fully come." And he remains in Galilee. Now, however, all of that has changed. And the manner in which Jesus appears here is, in a sense, so powerless. What startles us here, in contrast to Peter's response, is Jesus' use of power. He will "draw all people unto himself" to quote the verse "he will save the world" by dying for it. He will not be a charismatic, convincing political leader, much to the chagrin of Peter and the others. He will not be an incomparable warrior. He will not rule by winning, rather, he will win by losing. He will be the example of the suffering servant envisioned by Isaiah centuries before. He will reign by his defeat and powerlessness.

I suppose we each have moments in our lives that seem timeless" moments in relation to which we look back and say "From that moment on," as if we are simultaneously participating in *and observing* events as they unfold. Often such moments, though simple, contain bits of clarity and even wisdom. Occasionally, they are moments of transcendence. We might even say of them that in relation to a particular issue, *our* "hour" has come to see things in a way we had not before.

I recall just such a moment a number of years ago that seemed to bubble up from my own subconscious as I reflected upon the readings for this week. It has to do with baseball, a game, as Bart Giamatti said, "Designed to break our hearts." When our boys were younger, I coached their teams until they began to play for their high school programs. By the time Andrew went off to college I had 30 plaques of teams I coached on the walls of my student. This particular day, our oldest son was 9 or 10. I was the coach of his team, ensconced in the third-base coaching box. Now, for those of you unfamiliar with baseball, the third-base coach is a key position. From that vantage point one has a view of the entire field, and a perspective on the game which includes sending the runner, when appropriate, to home plate. I love this about baseball; the ultimate goal is to make it home. Our son was the lead-off batter, a duty he maintained all through high school. He could hit to the opposite field with power, and he was very fast. He jumped on the first pitch and drove it into the gap in right center field. As he neared first base, his first-base coach waved him on to second, while the right and center fielders converged on the ball that had stopped against the fence. As my son neared second, he looked toward the third base coach" in this case his own father" who enthusiastically waved him to third. Meanwhile the outfielder" I cannot recall which one" picked up the ball and threw it to the second baseman, who effectively served as the cut-off man. As my son approached third, the little second baseman wheeled and threw a perfect strike to his teammate at third. It was a beautiful play. My son slid, in a cloud summer dust, just as the third baseman laid down the tag. The umpire, positioned perfectly, yelled "you're out." And it was the right call. My son looked up at me and said "Dad, you told me to go." And in an instant I thought of my own intensely competitive nature, my own father, who would have told me I had not run fast enough or that I took too wide a turn at second, and I thought of the run we needed, now out at third. All of this in a second. And I said "I know, buddy, it's OK. Go on back to the dugout."

The drive home was very quiet. But something in me spoke, from the depths of my being, and I said, "You know, I am so very proud of you. You did exactly what we taught you to do, we run the bases aggressively to manufacture runs, we do, and we don't apologize for it. Coach Alexander at first told you to go to second. You did that perfectly. I made the call. They made a great play, and we have to tip our caps to them. But the most important thing is, this is not the last time I will be wrong. As much as father's wish we could be right all the time, we can't. But even when I am wrong, even when I make mistakes, I want you to know how very much I love you and how very proud I am of you." And suddenly, somehow, things between us seemed OK again. The time had come, if you will, for the image I had" maybe we both had" of me being the all-knowing, wise father who was never wrong" certainly not about baseball" to die. I had to decide what was more important: being right, in control, and winning all the time, or dying to my old image of myself, and maybe of who I wanted to appear to be in my son's eyes, in the service of a new relationship with my son. I had to lose myself, to find a new way of being a father.

The question put before us in today's Gospel is this: are we willing to be vulnerable enough to be agents of God? Are we strong enough? Not powerful enough or "never wrong enough" to be vulnerable in love? Are we willing to become like that which we celebrate in the Eucharist, Christ's Body broken for us? Are we willing to let our hearts be troubled and broken by the harrowing experience of the suffering of others and ourselves? Are we willing to trust God's wisdom and grace without trying to control the outcome, even if it means losing who we thought we were in the process? These are the questions that lead us into the mystery of the Resurrection. And as we relive the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Jesus we experience one of the great, harrowing ironies of our lives together in this community of faith, an irony Peter learns in today's Gospel. It is not our always our weaknesses that inhibit the power of God's love in our lives, but sometimes our "strengths." Well, dear one's, From that time on, my son and I were on a different kind of journey together. We learned that you can get your son called out at third, and still make it home. And that's where love lives. In the Gospel for today Jesus is reminding us that when we lose our old images of ourselves, when we die with and into him, he is waiting for us, loving us. And we are safe at home. Amen.