

GRAVE AND GRAND

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
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I've only ever known two people who have died and come back to life. Apparently it happens more often than we realize. The first man was from my church, and he was walking in a mall on Holy Saturday in Port Hawkesbury a few years ago, when he collapsed and died. The odds were against him. But, thanks to CPR, he was back on his feet and serving up sausages at the Sunrise Service breakfast the next morning like he always did. The second person I've known to do that was from this church. Great guy. I had been called to the hospital shortly after it happened. I went to his room to check in on him, and after a few short moments I asked, "Where's your wife?" and he replied, "Oh, she's down in the TV room watching Tiger!"

By now, many of you have seen the Nike commercial that was released just in time for the Masters that shows Tiger Woods staring into a camera filmed in black and white. Nike is counting on the fact that most people don't just watch 'golf', they watch 'Tiger.' The commercial is absent of music or sound, except for the voice of his late father Earl admonishing him from the grave. In thirty seconds, we see a remorseful Tiger listening to the words of his father asking him if he learned anything. That, and the we get to see the Nike swoosh three times (two of them on Tiger himself) leaving no doubt that this commercial is less about morality and is more about selling product. Most people agree that it's rather morbid yet Nike has managed to create a video that has

gone viral, meaning that not only are people watching it; they are seeking ways to do so.

Coincidentally, last week I mentioned Icarus, a character from Greek mythology whose father created wings for him, which melted when Icarus flew too close to the sun. This week, we're talking about a winged goddess by the name of Nike who personified victory.

Now before we get too far along this morning, I'm not placing any judgments on Tiger Woods. What that family needs now are prayers. And this message today isn't brought to you by Nike, although for a substantial fee I could be persuaded to put their logo on my robe. I'm not above or beneath that!

But we are talking about a faith, the kind of message that comes out of the grave yard and into our lives today, a grave and grand kind of faith. This morning, I want to talk to you about the kind of faith from John's Gospel that makes you jump out of a boat, and into the cold waters of life. I want to talk about the kind of faith that shouts at us from a distance and tells us how to fish for life. I want to talk to you about the kind of faith where you can sit on a beach eating bread and fish in the presence of Christ and doubt no longer. Where you don't dare speak because you know you are in the presence of holiness and you are warmed by its fire. That's an Easter kind of faith!

I lament up here from time to time about the kind of faith that survives only in the presence of doubt. Yet there is an Easter moment this morning when the disciples are so sure of whom they are seeing that Peter, who for some reason is naked in the boat, puts on clothes and jumps in the water. One would think it would be the other way around. The disciple whom Jesus loved, the one who reached the tomb first, it says, recognized the Lord, and Peter did what Peter does, and

charges in. Jesus has been fading in and out of their lives since that time. They can't seem to hold onto him. They can't seem to grasp him. But in each visit, they are offered care and peace. Whether it is in a room frozen in fear, Jesus will invite them out of the room and into the world. Today, on a beach, he feeds them breakfast as they sit around a fire. Nothing huge and overwhelming. And in his presence, as they bite into the bread and eat the fresh fish they have just caught (one of the best ways to eat it, in my opinion) and talk. Of course, if this happened in Shediac the gathering would be messier as they cracked open the lobster shells! The point is, we show people we love them when we feed them.

Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. The English fails us slightly. There are things happening here that we need to pause and think about. The Greek word for love that Jesus uses the Greek word for the highest, moral kind of love possible. An unconditional kind of love that is self giving. Peter uses the word love that is used to describe family or between close friends and colleagues. Jesus is asking Peter for a higher kind of love than perhaps Peter is willing to give. But in the final question to Peter, Jesus uses Peter's definition of love, knowing that Peter is only capable of that right now. Peter's feelings are hurt, but Jesus is gently trying to show him a different way to love.

Part of it, for me, is the thought that Jesus knows that life ahead for his friends won't be easy without him. In fact, it wasn't easy *with* him. But in this final moment, he gives them a teaching about love. The kind of love that inspires people to do more than just care for their families – it's the love that sacrifices the self in order to give more to the people around us. It's the kind of love that calls us from the walls of the places where we live and into the world to care for people. It's the kind of love that is sacrificial. I see it happening all

the time by members of this church, and I like lifting up the good work that is done by people here.

In the book *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles describes her experience of starting a food pantry at her Episcopalian church in San Francisco. There was a lot of opposition and many questions at first, but Miles persevered and in the end she came to see the food pantry as an extension and continuation of communion. This food pantry was not the same experience exactly, but it was not two entirely different experiences either. What's more, it was clear that having a food pantry genuinely transformed the church community at the same time, deepening their own understanding of what was happening during communion, and reminding them of how they were called to extend that feeding more broadly.

“Feed my sheep,” Jesus says, and “follow me.” In deep and profound ways, we are called as people here today to feed, heal, and love. *(From Pulpit Resource, April 2010)*

For some reason, Jesus throws in a little extra for Peter and lets him know that he'll die in his old age by being taken against his will. But it is something for Peter that will push him into being more than he is. Throughout the Gospels, Peter is portrayed as a strong leader capable of independent thinking - the very reasons why Jesus referred to him as the rock. “Petra,” the rock upon which the church would be built. Of course, Peter's greatest strengths are also his greatest weaknesses. For someone like Peter, who earned his living by the sea, and then met Jesus and helped to form this early community, what could be the greatest fear? Some have suggested that for such a person, being unable to determine his own direction, his own outcome. At the end of his life, Peter will be taken, against his will. Tradition holds that during the persecutions conducted by Nero in the first century, Peter was crucified upside down in Rome.

I've often thought that our greatest blessing is also our greatest burden. I see it all the time. Someone whose kindness and compassion is so strong in their lives that they sacrifice themselves, though sometimes they give too much of themselves to someone all too willing to take; the one whose work ethic and drive are so strong that it brings them success, but also takes a toll on their health and relationships. The one who is at peace and knows how to slow down in life, except that removed from them is ambition. Our blessing is our burden, and sometimes our burden is our blessing.

And when we lose ourselves in that process, it's good to be reminded of who we are. Jim Lowry is a preacher and a poet. This is from his poem, *At Dawn*.

If everything you believe in is true,
then there is hope.

If everything you believe in is a lie,
then there is no hope.

Remember what he taught you. . . .

Remembering what he taught you
is what will help you believe your Jesus is alive.

Today we must remember
how Jesus taught us
the meek really will,
at last,
inherit the earth.

We do believe that,
don't we?

Today we must remember
how Jesus taught us
the peacemakers really are the children of God.

We do believe that,
don't we?

Today we must remember
how Jesus taught us
that the ones who stand for what is right
will be blessed.

We do believe that,
shouldn't we?

If you long for hope
that will not let you go; . . .

If you want the children
to grow up surrounded by kindness born of truth;

If you long for the world
not to self-destruct,
this is the story you must remember
and this is the story the church must tell:

Remember how once a long time ago
a decree went out from Caesar Augustus
that all the world should be enrolled.

Then remember and tell
how Jesus was born
in Bethlehem of Judea; and
how he was tempted in the wilderness;
and how when he was baptized
the heavens opened and God said,
“This is my son. . . . Listen to him”; and
how he took little children on his knee
and said,

“Of such is the kingdom of God”;
and how he taught us
to turn the other cheek
and to love neighbour as self;
and how he made sick people well . . .
how when the disciples were in trouble
he walked to them on water; and

how he fed a multitude
with five loaves and two fish. . . .

We must remember and we must tell
the story of the Prodigal Son
and of the Good Samaritan;
and the Lost Sheep;
and the Invested Talents;
and all the rest.

And we must remember and we must tell
how he demonstrated
that dying for someone else's sin
is the love
that will keep the world
from self-destructing.

In those moments of deep, deep dawn,
When you remember what he taught you,
You will know. . . .
You will believe. . . .
You will be sure
there is hope so strong
not even the grave can contain it.

That hope for us is the truth of Jesus of Nazareth.

("At Deep Dawn," Journal for Preachers, Easter 2004, pp. 26–33)

I've begun reading a book written by Chris Cleave called, "Little Bee." I asked LeVar Burton, of Reading Rainbow fame and Star Trek: The Next Generation fame, on Twitter if he had read any excellent books. He wrote back to me suggesting this one. Within the first few pages I was struck by something that was profound. It alludes to the imagery of crucifixion. It alludes to the imagery of new life. It alludes to

the fear of a room, and it alludes to how we continue to live when the world has thrown its worst at us. I want to leave you with this as we journey into Easter, together, as a church.

It's the story of a woman from Nigeria in a detention centre in England. She's waiting to be released when she sees another woman from Nigeria. Little Bee, the main character, says that there were two ways to survive the detention area: you must look good or talk good. Little Bee decided that talking would be safer for her. Little Bee looks and sees a woman whose thing was beauty, not talking.

She says, "On the girl's brown legs there were many small white scars. I was thinking, do these scars cover the whole of you, like the stars and the moons on your dress? I thought that would be pretty too, and I ask you right here please to agree with me that a scar is never ugly. That is what the scar makers want us to think. But you and I, we must make an agreement to defy them. We must see all scars as beauty. Okay? This will be our secret. Because take it from me, a scar does not form on the dying. A scar means, *I survived*."

In a few breaths' time I will speak some sad words to you. But you must hear them the same way we have agreed to see scars now. Sad words are just another beauty. A sad story means, this storyteller is *alive*. The next thing you know, something fine will happen to her, something marvellous, and then she will turn around and smile." (From the book, *Little Bee*, written by Chris Cleave)

These stories that we read each week are stories of survival. I pray they continue to encourage each of us.

Amen.