

Resurrection hope – The Triumph of Grace - John 21:1-19

Problem in the world

Good morning. We're exploring the theme of resurrection hope this side of Easter, particularly in light of how we emerge individually and as a community from this Covid season. I don't know about you, but all of the uncertainty of the last 6 months (or longer) has taken a massive toll on me. It's got me in a bit of a funk. I feel like I have retreated somewhat into a comfortable space with my habits and routines. One of the things that I love to do is to host a regular board games evening with friends, using it as a way to build relational connection. It is something that doesn't require much effort, it is life-giving, I enjoy it. Even still, I haven't yet this year taken a moment to sit down and contact people and organise a regular thing. And this is something that I enjoy, how much harder will it be to try and do something new, challenging or costly? This season of Covid, of living day by day, week by week, has, if I am honest, brought a level of comfortable inertia to my life, habits and routines. My days have fallen into certain grooves, or ruts, and it is hard to get out. None of this is necessarily wrong, but neither is it particularly generative or life-giving. The Psalmist refers to having gone down into The Pit. Now, I don't want to overstate this, I am not in a deep pit of despair or personal distress. And if you are in that place, I pray that some light of resurrection hope reaches you this morning, in faith that Jesus sits with you there in that place. Regardless of its depth however, The Pit that has opened in my life over the last season is real. Perhaps you may relate in some way, and can think of ways in our own life, whether big or small, where your life has been changed by the uncertainties and anxieties of our current moment. And as we look at the world, it doesn't seem that these will be allayed any time soon.

Problem in the text

Our Gospel reading this morning finds Peter in a similar place. Recent events had been a turbulent roller coaster ride to say the least. He would be carrying the bags of shame from his spectacular denial of Jesus. He had lost a dear friend and leader. The one whom Peter had confessed was the Christ, the Messiah, the one who would liberate Israel had died, and the cause with him. A cause Peter had given up so much for. And then there had been a couple of crazy encounters with the risen Lord. But while this miraculous resurrection has changed everything, Peter is still experiencing some level of uncertainty and anxiety. A

sense of lack and failure and loss, despite the resurrection. Perhaps Peter is experiencing a feeling of separation from Jesus because of his denial. Him and Jesus still haven't had a chance to discuss the elephant in the room, and despite these resurrection encounters Peter is still in a bit of a funk. If I were in Peter's shoes, the questions ringing in my head would be, 'am I still accepted? Am I still qualified? Does Jesus still want to use me?' Peter is feeling the gulf of estrangement. In the face of uncertainty, Pete withdraws into what was comfortable and safe. He goes fishing. Now, fishing was not a nice recreational activity for Peter, to clear his head. Get a bit of space. No, this was his work before he met the rabble-rousing Rabbi, and this was a withdrawal, a retreat into what was familiar, safe. And as he is the de facto leader of this displaced group, the others follow. "We'll got with you" they say and join Pete for a night of unsuccessful fishing.

The Solution in the Text

Then they have a moment of *déjà vu*. A stranger calls cheekily from the shore, "Hey lads, you haven't got any fish have you? How about you try the other side." Their minds re-collect the last time a stranger gave these professional fishermen fishing advice. As the net heaves with fish, John cries out, "it is the Lord!" And Pete, ever unthinkingly enthusiastic and eager puts on his garment and throws himself into the lake, for they were only a hundred yards off, or two lengths of an Olympic swimming pool. Perhaps he saw this as his only chance to get some one-on-one time with Jesus. And here, beside the lake, Jesus takes Pete on a journey of reconciliation, restoration, and recalibration. This journey takes Pete back to the place of his first calling, through the place of his deepest hurt, and brings him to a place where he learns at last what is meant by his acceptance.

Firstly, this meeting beside the lake takes Pete back to that first incident with boats, nets and fish. The time when Jesus called Peter out of the fishing business. In Luke 5:8, after the first miraculous catch, Peter fell down at Jesus' knees and said to him, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." What is Jesus' response? "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Pete seemed to accept his acceptance then, but often repentance is harder the second, or third, or fourth... time. When we fail again and again, we can be tempted to think, 'surely God is gonna give up on me one of these days...' I bet Peter was feeling this. By having this encounter by the lake, with the boats and the nets and the fish, Jesus is taking Peter back to this place of his initial encounter and confession. It's almost as

if Jesus is saying to him, I accepted, called and commissioned you then. I accept, call and commission you now.

Secondly, this encounter takes place beside the charcoal fire. There are only two mentions of this word “charcoal-fire” in all of Scripture. Here, and the fire that Peter warms himself beside as he denies Jesus in John 18. It is the place of Peter’s most spectacular failure. Jesus doesn’t just meet Peter at the place of his original call and confession. By encountering Peter by the charcoal fire, Jesus brings Peter to the place of his most painful memory. As Peter warms his wet body beside the lake, his hands spread out over the fire, the denial is clearly in view, even if not explicitly mentioned. No one needs to. Peter wondering, in light of this, can you still forgive me, can you still use me, do you still accept me? But Jesus had already accepted him. Jesus had predicted this moment of denial, telling him in no uncertain terms, ‘you will deny me.’ Each of the gospels recount this prediction. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus lets Peter and the disciples know, that when he is risen he will go ahead of them to Galilee, this very encounter in mind. In Luke’s account. Jesus says to him, “I have prayed for you, that your faith will not fail, and once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” And in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells him, “you won’t be able to follow me now, but later you will follow me.” And immediately after predicting the denial, he says, “let not your hearts be troubled.” Jesus is not intimidated or put off by the weak and frail love. By the spectacular denial. And this recommissioning of Peter is not a dismissal of everything that has gone before. It is not despite his failures he is accepted. Jesus accepts Peter even in the face of him declaring the denial and falling away of all the disciples. It’s not, okay, you denied me, but this time you are going to try harder. No. You could even argue the denial is necessary to Peter actually getting to the place where he learns to accept that he is accepted.

Finally, after breakfast, Jesus turns to Simon. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” More than what? The text doesn’t say, it could be referring to the boats and nets, do you love me more than the safety and security of this occupation that I called you out of? Or he could be reminding Peter of his claim when Jesus said that he would deny him that “all these others might deny you, but I will not.”

Then Jesus asks a second time, “Do you love me.” You have probably heard about the differences in the words used for love here. Jesus in the first two questions, uses the Greek

word for the highest form of love, *agape*. And Pete responds with, “yes Lord, you know that I love you.” The word Peter uses is *phileo*, for affectionate love, the love of friendship. The third time Jesus asks, he asks, “Simon son of John, do you *phileo* me.” This distresses Peter. Perhaps the three questions have connected painfully in Peter’s mind to the three denials. Or perhaps Peter is pained by Jesus reducing the question down to, “do you have affection for me.” I am reminded of when toddlers ask, “do you love me this much?” With their arms out to get a gauge of how much you love them. Then they ask again, putting out the arms a little further. And then they stretch out their arms as wide as they can. “Do you love me this much?” I feel like Jesus is doing this in reverse. But of course, Jesus is not asking these questions to interrogate Peter about his level of love and commitment. I believe that there is a deeper question beneath the question. It is this: Do you know how much I accept you Peter? Do you know that I accept you when your love is faithful and strong? Do you know that I accept you when your love is so-so? Do you know that I accept you when your love is weak and frail? Only once Peter knows how much he is accepted is he ready to step into the role of leading the flock. Jesus accepts Peter as he is, even when Peter struggles with the idea. Jesus accepts Peter as he is, with all his weak, frail love, even when Peter does not. Jesus takes Peter on this journey of accepting that he is accepted. That is what grace is, accepting that we are accepted. Through tears, Peter accepts this fact. “Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.” Even when it is weak and frail.

This is the Triumph of Grace. Jesus brings Peter to the place of his first call, through his biggest failure, and brings Peter back to a radical acceptance of his acceptance. From the place of acceptance, Jesus gave Peter a job to do. To feed and tend the sheep. To disciple and strengthen others.

Solution in the world

It is this encounter that I know I need right now to bring me out of my funk, not to try harder, but an encounter with Grace. An acceptance of how much I am accepted.

Paul Tillich said exactly this in a sermon he preached called, ‘You are accepted’:

“Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were

estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

I wonder where and how this encounter speaks into your life today? Regardless of where you are at this morning. Regardless of how strong or weak your love is. Has an experience rooted in weak and frail love left you feeling disqualified? Has the uncertainty and anxiety of our current moment left you feeling in a rut, a funk or experiencing 'The Pit'? Have you "gone fishing" so to speak? Have you retreated to a comfortable safety? Are there areas of life you feel you have 'checked out' of? If so, Jesus is inviting us out of our funk. Perhaps the uncertainties, anxieties and challenges of our current moment have left you weary and tired. You are accepted. I believe in this season we have a great opportunity, where so much has been stripped away, for ruthless reprioritisation as a community and individuals. Not simply to get busy for the Lord. But to first and foremost encounter grace. To accept that we are accepted. To declare weakly, "Lord you know everything, you know that I love you." And from that place of grace, of acceptance, to listen to what God might be inviting you into. Or perhaps even out of.

This is our resurrection hope:

Jesus comes to you, wherever you are.

Jesus accepts you.

Accept that you are accepted.

From this place of acceptance, what is it Jesus is calling you out into?