

And What Then...?  
John 21:9-19

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There is a story that is told about the British Prime Minister, the late William Gladstone that goes something like this:

“He was approached one day by the son of a close friend. The young man sought the Prime Minister’s counsel regarding his career plans.

‘First,’ he explained, I plan to complete my studies at Oxford.’

‘Splendid’, responded the Prime Minister, ‘and what then?’

‘Well, sir, then I plan to study the law and become a prominent barrister.’

‘Excellent,’ said Gladstone, ‘and what then?’

‘Then I plan to stand for election and become a member of parliament.’

‘Wonderful,’ said Gladstone, ‘and what then?’

‘Then, sit, I plan to rise to prominence in the party and be appointed to a cabinet post.’

‘A worthy ambition,’ replied the senior statesman, ‘and what then?’

“Oh, Mr. Gladstone,’ the boy blurted out a bit self-consciously, ‘I plan one day to become Prime Minister and serve my queen with the same distinction as you.’

‘A noble desire, young man, and what then?’

‘Well sir I expect that in time I will be forced to retire from public life.’

‘You will indeed,’ replied the Prime Minister, ‘and what then?’

Puzzled by the question, the young man said hesitantly, ‘I expect then that one day I will die.’

‘Yes you will, and what then?’

‘I don’t know sir, I haven’t thought any further than that.’

‘Young man,’ said Gladstone, ‘you are a fool. Go home and think your life through from it’s end.’”

Having celebrated two weeks ago with joy the end of Lent, and the hopeful beginning of the season of Eastertide, it is time that we should ask ourselves the question “and what then?” It is right that we should ask it while the strains of the brass and choir have not entirely faded from our ears, and the scent of the lilies still lingers in the fading flowers around the building, while we still remember the crush of humanity that filled this sanctuary – I remember standing on the front steps on Easter Sunday looking at the people streaming into the building wondering, “where are we going to put them?” While that memory is still in our minds we need to repeat the question, “and what then?”

Isn’t that the real question of Easter?

We have to ask the question “and what then...?” precisely because we are Easter people. We know the good news of the Gospel, the reality of the resurrection, and yet can you see that things are so very different this week? I serve on the board of Intown Collaborative Ministries – and we’re hosting a fundraiser in a few weeks to raise money for the restorative, humanizing work of that ministry, and yet we know that people will still suffer from homelessness, and the next year, we will raise money again. Our members deliver meals to Journey Shelter and Clifton Sanctuary only to know that we will continue to deliver them and to realize that once more, someone will need to step into that role if we are to continue. We raid our closets and give our clothes to Goodwill and the Salvation Army and yet we know that the need does not go away, that next winter there will be people who need our cast-offs just to stay warm. Yet we know that we will do the same next winter, and the winter after. We are an Easter people who live in a

Lenten world and we need to ask the question “and what then...?” in order that we may think about our lives, our actions, our ministry as a church from the end.

I sometimes wonder if it was just too much to take in, the events of Easter. The crucifixion, the resurrection, in John’s Gospel, the appearance to the twelve and then to Thomas. I think perhaps it was just about too much to take in. And I think Peter felt it too. You know that feeling you get when you haven’t slept well, when there’s a desk full of unfinished work that needs finishing, and a swirl of emotions from great grief to great joy and confusion- the feeling you have when things are a little blurry around the edges, when you have to work to think of the next word to complete the sentence. I think that’s about where Peter was. They’d gone down to the sea of Tiberias and I think Peter just needed to do something that would exert himself and clear his mind and let him think straight. Some folks go to the gym, some folks play golf, some shop. Peter went fishing. The five others decided to invite themselves along, and they set out in the boat and fished all night long. They fished all night long and they caught nothing. Have you ever felt like that, the rope is frayed on both ends and you’ve just got to get away and you’ve fished all night and caught nothing?

Jesus wanders up on the shore and they don’t recognize him. How often do we hear that phrase- how often does it seem painfully applicable to our life, that we don’t recognize Jesus?

He calls out to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?”

They answered him- NO!

“Well, why are you doing the same thing? Cast your net on the right side of the boat.”

Now, I'm no animal behavior specialist, but I know that fish swim under the boat and aren't really concerned right or left sides of the boat, so I'm pretty sure there's a metaphor in here somewhere. But John gets it. His head snaps up, his eyes get big, he scrambles to catch hold of Peter's arm, "It is the Lord!"

Peter bolts into action, he grabs his tunic, shimmies into it, and does a face-plant into the water scrambling for shore. He's chasing after Jesus, he needs to see him, to talk to him, to ask the question, "and what then...?"

I worry sometimes that sitting in my plush chair in a comfortable study writing sermons that will be heard in an air-conditioned sanctuary that I am missing something of the urgency that drove Peter. Now don't get me wrong, I like my chair. I love what I do.

I'm grateful in Georgia for the HVAC system. But I worry that if we are not careful that we lose that fire in the belly that pushes us to carry Easter with us, to be dissatisfied with a post-Easter world that looks the same as before.

Peter has to ask that question because he has seen the resurrection and he still sees the world around him and it's still broken. He has to ask the question because he sees the resurrection but he remembers still his denial. He has to ask the question, "and what then...?" because there's still something missing.

And Jesus knows there is still something missing. He knows that Peter has fished all night and caught nothing. He knows that there is something that still needs to be resolved.

Jesus fixes breakfast and the others come ashore and they sit down and they eat.

Then he turns to Simon Peter, Peter who is still smarting with the recollection of the night of Jesus' arrest.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” “Feed my lambs.”

Peter swallows hard, drops his chin and nods.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” “Tend my sheep.”

Peter flushes, tears spring to his eyes and he nods again.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

I imagine this is just about the breaking point. Three times he has been asked this question – once for each denial. Peter knows he has hurt his Lord whom he loves by his betrayal and it is eating at him and with his voice almost breaking he fairly shouts, “Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you!” “Feed my sheep.”

After all of this and more, Jesus turns to him and says, “Follow me.”

Remember those words, “follow me?” They are the words that Jesus first spoke to Peter.

They are the words that made Peter drop his fishing nets and leave his wife at home and set out on a journey of faith. They are the words that led Peter to the Garden with Jesus.

After all of the pain of the passion, the worry, the fear, the grief, the elation- after all of the fishing and catching nothing, these words come back again, this time as words of grace- words of grace so quick that we almost miss them, Follow me.

Oh, but Peter caught it. For Peter, these words are no throw away line, they are the words of reconciliation. Yes, Peter, I know you denied me. Yes, Peter, I know you are afraid.

Yes, Peter, the world is still broken. Follow me. There is redemption. Follow me.

Perhaps you saw the movie *About Schmidt*. It’s been out long enough that I don’t feel any remorse about telling you how it goes. The very first scene is Warren Schmidt’s

retirement dinner. He is seated on the dais with his wife of forty-two years and there are toasts- empty speeches, painfully long, letting us know essentially that Schmidt's time of service to the company he works for is over. Schmidt spends the first part of the movie trying to adjust to retirement from his long career as Vice President and actuary of Woodmen of the World Insurance Company. He tries to get used to life without a schedule so he works himself into a routine sleeping late and watching too much television. As he is surfing through the channels late one night he happens upon one of those children's funds commercials, narrated by Angela Lansbury. He is momentarily transfixed, and he picks up the phone and dials and makes a pledge. He forgets about the phone call and tries to go about his life. His wife serves him breakfast in the Winnebago they have bought to travel through their retirement years. He sorts through his mail in his study, pays the bills, settles into a routine. Then his packet arrives welcoming him to the child outreach program. He gets the obligatory photo, and as he is writing the check for \$22.00, he reads in the letter correspondence is welcome. So he pulls out a yellow legal pad and starts off "Dear Ndugu, I'm your new foster father." And he proceeds to write a letter that no six year old could ever understand. He heads out to post the letter with the words of his wife, don't dilly-dally ringing in his ears. So he does what any spouse who has been told not to dilly-dally would do: he heads to the Dairy Queen.

As he enters his house we hear the vacuum cleaner still running as it was when he left and he finds his wife has died while he was gone. And as suddenly as retirement seemed to be upon him, widowhood was as well. "Dear Ndugu, I have some sad news."

Through the rest of the film, Ndugu is the regular correspondent. And if Ndugu is at a loss for how to read his foster father's mail, it is clear that Warren Schmidt has no more

understanding of him either, signing off his letters “I’m sure you will want to run down and cash this check and get something to eat...” We don’t hear from Ndugu, only Schmidt’s side of the correspondence, as he proceeds to tell his side of the story through a lonely and difficult time. Finally, after Schmidt’s daughter marries a man he considers irredeemably beneath her, he comes home and lapses into depression, Dear Ndugu, he writes, there is nothing left for me, I am a failure, and eventually I will die. Just as Schmidt hits the bottom, he is sorting through the mail and happens upon his first letter back from Ndugu. Only, it’s not a letter. The Catholic sister writing for Ndugu explains that he is only six and cannot read, but he has enclosed a painting for Schmidt. As Schmidt unfolds the tempera paint covered newsprint, we see two stick figures. One is large and peachy colored, the other small and brown. They are holding hands. The connection is made. Schmidt dissolves into tears.

Life on this side of Easter is no more easy than the other side. There is still brokenness. There is still loneliness. There is still hunger. Questions still trouble us. We still struggle to find those live-giving, life-renewing connections. We lapse into comfortable Christianity, we deny Christ. We are shaken from our easy faith like Peter, and we are forgiven. It is part of the ebb and flow of faith. And always in that ebb and flow we need to ask the question, “and what then...?” The answer of Easter faith is “Follow me.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.