

“Follow Me”
John 21:1-19
3rd Sunday of Easter

April 23, 2023
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

It pains me, as a Yankees fan, to begin a sermon talking about the Boston Red Sox...but today, I think our text requires me to go in that direction. Today’s text reminded me of an essay from *The New Yorker*, an essay published back in 1960 by the late writer, John Updike.

It’s a piece about the baseball legend, and former Red Sox player, Ted Williams.

For those of you who aren’t familiar:

Ted Williams had a Hall of Fame career despite leaving baseball on two separate occasions for military service. Some consider Ted Williams to be the finest hitter who ever lived, better even than Babe Ruth.

And in his final at-bat as a major league ballplayer, Ted Williams hit a home run. As Updike wrote about that moment, “...I heard that Williams had decided not to accompany the team to New York [for the final series of the season].

“So he knew how to do even that, the hardest thing.

[He knew how to...] Quit.”¹

What Updike didn’t know, however, was that Williams didn’t quit. He quit playing baseball, but he could not quit competing.

¹ John Updike, “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu,” appearing in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*, David Halberstam, ed., New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Ted Williams loved to fish, so after baseball he fished and he fished until he developed a reputation as one of the best fly fisherman in America.

In fact, do you know who the only person is to be inducted
in both the Baseball Hall of Fame
and the Fishing Hall of Fame?

Ted Williams.

Believe it or not, I think this little piece of sports trivia
has something to do with our Gospel text today.

What did Ted Williams do when his career was over?
When this huge, important chunk of his life was done
and he couldn't go back to it?

He went fishing.

But more to the point, he fell back on something that was very familiar, something that would steady the ship.

Which is, I think, the same thing happens to Peter in our text.

Easter is over, Jesus is risen, and what does Peter do?
Peter gets some of the other disciples together, and they decide to go fishing...*to go FISHING??*

I read this text and thought: it makes no sense!
Jesus is alive!

There must be people to tell, things to do.

Just last week, Jesus told his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Why go fishing?

But then I read the text again, and I thought:

Oh, this makes a world of sense.

I can just imagine what Peter might be thinking.

I denied Jesus three times, I ran away when Jesus wanted me to stay—not a hero, not a saint, just a fisherman...I’m going fishing.

You see, for Peter, getting into his fishing boat AFTER Easter means returning to the familiar, going back to the status quo.

Some days being in the boat means a good catch.

Some days being in the boat means a poor catch.

But at least Peter knows what he’s doing when he’s in his fishing boat.

It’s the place where he’s most comfortable.

Peter doesn’t have to take chances with his life or with his faith...when he’s in his boat.

And you know what happens next. The risen Jesus sees Peter in his boat, he calls out to him, and he meets Peter on the beach. And according to our text, Jesus is making breakfast on the beach by “a charcoal fire.”

It sounds like a throw-away detail, but do you know where else John talks about a charcoal fire? Back in chapter 18, after Jesus has been arrested, and Peter is standing outside the courtyard, and it’s cold, so he’s standing with some other folks around a charcoal fire...and those people say, “Hey, aren’t you one of them?”

And it's then that Peter denies Jesus 3 times.

Do you see what's happening in this text?

The risen Jesus, standing by a charcoal fire, says to Peter:

“Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

In chapter 18, three denials around a charcoal fire.

In chapter 21, three appeals to Peter, letting him know he is still his disciple, around a charcoal fire.

Even more than seeing the empty tomb, THIS is Peter's Easter moment.

The charcoal fire with Jesus...

It means new life for Peter.

It means new hope for Peter.

It means he can get out of his boat.

Jesus is telling him, “You are not a failed disciple who denied me three times. You're my beloved child, and I have work for you to do.”

For Peter, Easter means **that he's not the worst thing he's ever done**. And that's a pretty powerful thing to hear.

You're not the worst thing you've ever done.

It's what Bryan Stevenson, the author of *Just Mercy* and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, it's what he tells all those people on death row.

You are not the worst thing you've ever done.

It's what Gregory Boyle keeps telling all those former gang members in Los Angeles. You are God's beloved child.

You are not the worst thing you've ever done.

A while back, the retired bishop Will Willimon reflected on his years as Dean of the Chapel at Duke.

On one occasion, a fraternity invited him to give a talk.

His assigned topic was "Character and College."

When he arrived at the fraternity, he knocked on the door, and when the door opened, he was NOT greeted by a fraternity brother.

He was greeted by a young boy of about nine or ten.

What's a kid doing over here at this time of the night?

Willimon wondered.

"They're waiting for you in the common room," the boy said.

"Follow me, I'll take you there."

They wound their way back into the common room and the fraternity was gathered, glumly waiting for Dr. Willimon's presentation.

As he began his remarks, he noted that the little boy climbed up next to one of the fraternity brothers. Shortly thereafter, he fell asleep with his head on the shoulder of this college kid.

"Well, I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour. When I finally finished my talk I asked if they had any questions or comments."

Dead silence.

So, he thanked them and made his way out.

Then he heard one of the fraternity brothers say to the little boy,
*"You go on and get ready for bed.
 I'll be there soon to tuck you in and read you a story."*

That same fraternity brother caught up with Willimon to show him out. When they got outside, he lit a cigarette, took a drag on it, and thanked Dr. Willimon for his remarks.

"Let me ask you," Willimon replied, "Who was the kid in there tonight?"

"Oh, that's Tommy," he said.

"The fraternity is part of the Big Brother program.

We met Tommy that way.

His mom's on [drugs] and having a tough time.

Sometimes it gets so bad that she can't care for him.

So we told Tommy to call us up when he needs us.

We go over, pick him up,

and he stays with us until it's okay to go home.

We take him to school, buy him his clothes, books, and stuff."

"That's amazing," Willimon replied.

"I take back all that I said about you people being bad and irresponsible."

"I tell you what's amazing," the 21-year-old college student said, "what's amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else."²

² William Willimon, "Revolution!" Pulpit Resource, Logos, January 22, 2006.

That's the story of Peter!
Do you see what we're talking about today?

Stepping out of our comfort zones, doing something new with our faith, getting outside our boat.

Let me ask you a question.
How many of you are sitting in basically the same seat you always sit in on Sunday morning?

Why did you choose that seat?
It's familiar, right?
Kind of like your boat, right here in this sanctuary.

Now, I'm not going to suggest that you change your seat in here. But when it comes to where you sit OUT THERE...what would it look like for you to step away from your boat?

To share your faith in a new way?
To love your neighbor by doing something you've never tried before?

Jesus says to Peter, "Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."

Easter doesn't give us more control over our life.
But it does give us our calling in life.

A calling to step outside our boat,
to move away from what's familiar,
a calling to follow Jesus wherever he wants to us to go.

There was a church conference that took place some 30 years ago.
The topic was HIV/AIDS—ministry for people with this disease.

This was in the earlier days of the disease,
when AIDS was feared by many, misunderstood by many.

At the conference, an AIDS activist spoke for about an hour.
It was a tirade of invective against the church.
She castigated the church for its conservatism,
its backwardness,
its fear.

Most of the charges were well deserved.

When she finally finished, she asked if there were questions.
No one was DUMB enough to question this woman.

But then an older woman came to the microphone.

She said, “I’m a member of the women’s Bible study at my church.

“Most of us have been there for the last 20 years—
the same women, studying the Bible, week after week...

We have refreshments, and then we have our Bible study.”

Well, it was obvious that the speaker was getting impatient, but
this elderly woman persisted.

“One week, after refreshments,
after we’d been studying the Bible for some time,
one of the participants talked about how hard it was to
understand what Jesus meant when he said certain things.

Then Vivian spoke up.

**‘BE HONEST. We already understand enough about Jesus.
Understanding isn’t the problem.
Doing it is the problem.**

Loving like Jesus is much more difficult than understanding him.’

Her words really struck us as right.

In our prayer time we asked for Jesus to show us the way he wanted us to go.

“Well, the very next week, one of the women came and told us that she had met a young man in her apartment building who was dying of AIDS.

The young man had been forsaken by his family.
He had no one.

“She’d been visiting him, doing some light cleaning around his apartment, running errands when he was too ill to go out.

“That’s where we came in. We realized that Jesus was calling us to be representative grandmothers for people suffering from this illness.

From that point on, each of us adopted someone with AIDS,
and we now serve as that person’s grandmother.”

The woman then looked squarely at the speaker.

“Ma’am,” she said, “I’ll admit this is a little thing.

It’s an ORDINARY thing—

nothing as impressive as all you talk about—

but it is something we could do...

so we have done it.”³

Friends, the good news of Easter is that God surprises us and moves us into a world we never would have created on our own.

At Easter, Jesus reminds us that we don't get the final word about who and whose we are.

Jesus says to us:

You are not the worst thing you've ever done.

You're not your resume, and you're not your report card.

And you're not how much money you make.

You are not the grief that keeps returning.

You are not your demons that you keep battling.

You are God's beloved child, and the risen Jesus has something for you to do.

You see, I think we all have our boats that we love to retreat to.

Being in the boat that's most familiar in our life is what gives us a sense of control.

But if I understand the text correctly, the good news of Easter is not only that Jesus came to Peter, forgave Peter, and called Peter out of the comforts of his fishing boat, into a whole new life.

The good news of Easter is that Jesus promises to do
the very same thing for me and for you.

Amen.

³ I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for this story.