

GUIDING LIGHT

May 5, 2019

Easter 3

[Acts 9:1-9,17-21](#)

[John 21:1-7,15-17,19b](#)

(prayer)

Fourteen days ago, we celebrated Easter: we remembered that (early on a Sunday morning) the disciples discovered that the tomb (where they had left the body of Jesus) was empty. It was assumed that thoughtless grave robbers had stolen it.

A select few of the group were given a hopeful message: *Why do you look for the living among the dead? Jesus is risen!* But the angels' words were hard to hold.

Then Mary Magdalene saw Jesus: alive again. She told the others, but (for them) her words were hard to hold.

Until... that evening, when Jesus appeared to most of them. They told Thomas, but (for him) their words were hard to hold.

Until... a week later, when *the disciple called the twin* felt Jesus' wounds for himself.

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Even with Thomas' doubt abated, the words of Easter would still prove hard to hold beyond the 20 or so *privileged few* who had seen and believed.

The embrace of Resurrection Hope would have to rely on more than logic and the five physical senses. It would require faith: trust beyond what can be confirmed with eyes and hands. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

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The challenge at this point - even for Thomas and Mary and Peter - was... what impact will Easter have moving forward.

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On our calendars, it has been two weeks since Easter. As we move into chapter twenty-one of the gospel of John, we can reasonably assume that more than two weeks have passed.

How are Jesus' disciples doing?

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Chapter twenty ends by telling us that the Risen Christ spent more time with the disciples in Jerusalem and *performed many other signs in their presence.*

As we heard today, by chapter twenty-one, Jesus' followers had returned to Capernaum in Galilee.

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You may know that Peter is not that disciple's given name. His father, Yohannen, named him after one of the sons of Jacob: Simeon.

At the lakeshore that day three years earlier, Jesus invited the fisherman, Simeon ben Yohannen (Simon-son-of-John), to follow and *fish for people.*

It was Jesus who started referring to Simon as *Cephas* (the Aramaic word for rock).

We don't know the precise origins of the nickname, but we can say that, a few decades later, a new generation of followers would interpret it as meaning that Simon would be a solid foundation on

which the Jesus Movement was being built.

In the language of the New Testament, Chephas is rendered as Petros: a male version of the noun, petra (the Greek word for rock).

Hence: in English, we call this rock of a disciple: Peter.

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In many ways, Peter typifies the quandary facing the disciples: what now?

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Today, we read... *Gathered by the Sea of Tiberias (aka the Sea of Galilee) were Simon Peter, Thomas, James, John, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat.*

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It seems that Peter was resigned to going back to his pre-Jesus life.

Maybe, he'd been out of this fishing game too long, because after a night of effort they hadn't caught a thing.

As they were nearing the shore with the empty boat, a fellow fisherman (who Peter didn't recognize - not surprising given that he'd been on the road for three years) offered some advice: *try casting your nets on the other side of the boat.* This turned out to be wise counsel: they over-filled the nets!

It was at that point that a light went on in the disciple John's head: *It is the Lord!* Peter was so excited that he swam to shore.

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The crux of this story is the conversation that happened after everyone had finished breakfast.

Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.

Look after my flock.

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Three times, Jesus asks.

Three times, Peter says yes.

Feed my lambs; Tend my sheep; Feed my sheep!

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There are some subtle curiosities in Jesus' final instructions:

- feed versus tend;
- sheep versus lambs.

Perhaps this is to make sure that Peter knows that the task is to be multi-layered: Jesus' followers will include new disciples as well as the old guard (lambs and sheep) and that Peter's role is to be more than teaching: also, community building (feed and tend).

In spite of these slight differences, it is also curious that Peter seems frustrated by the third question: *Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.'*

At first glance, we might assume that Peter is bothered by the fact that Jesus doesn't seem content to take "yes" for an answer.

But, there is a less obvious subtle curiosity in Jesus' questions that might offer a different theory. We don't see this in English, but when Jesus asks if Peter loves him, the first two times the verb is *agapé*, the final time it is *philia*. Both words are *legitimately* translated as "love". But they do have different [connotations](#).

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

Agapé is selfless, unconditional love.
Philia is relational: affection, fondness.

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Agapé is often described as the highest level of love. It does not require anything from the receiver. It is offered regardless of what else is going on between the parties.

Agapé is actually hard to honestly attain... especially between people who spend any significant time together.

The King James Version of the bible often translated agapé as *charity*... which is not a bad choice, actually. Showing love without expecting a quid pro quo. When you drop some change in the box at the checkout counter at the grocery store or put a toonie into a panhandler's cap or pay for the coffee of the person behind you in the drive through, it is an act of unconditional compassion... you don't expect anything in return.

But, let's be honest agapé, in quick small bursts, is not really that hard... because, there isn't often a very deep relationship.

When, we hear agapé-love commanded in the bible, it is a more lofty goal -- that is supposed to be lived out in bigger ways. *Agapé one another as I agapé you. Even if my faith can move mountains, but have not agapé, I am nothing. Agapé your neighbour as yourself.*

The readers of the New Testament are more likely to believe that God is capable of agapé than people are. In fact, sometimes, we question whether we are worthy of such compassion even from God and have invited the word *grace* to describe God's gift of love, in spite of our unworthiness.

Some people are more comfortable with a God of judgment rather than a God of agapé.

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Let's be honest: human beings have a problem with agapé: it doesn't sit well within doctrines of responsibility and consequences. To use biblical language: sometimes agapé seems to be in opposition to justice.

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I look at the debates about voting rights going on in parts of the US. You may have heard that, last November, the people of the state of Florida overwhelmingly approved a referendum re-franchising felons who have completed their sentences. Unlike in Canada, in most of the US, if you are convicted of a crime, you are not allowed to vote. Before last fall, in Florida, it was a lifetime ban. **Now**, in the Sunshine State, once your debt to society is paid, your right to vote is restored. Bernie Sanders, as part of his presidential bid, is promoting a Canada-like model: where all competent citizens, regardless of their criminal history or current incarceration or parole status, should never lose the right to vote.

To some, this level of societal generosity seems un-just. After all, are [Dzhokhar Tsarnaev](#) or [Dylann Roof](#) or [Bill Cosby](#) worthy of the honour of participating in elections?

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Agapé might be easy to embrace, in theory, as a general rule, but in practical ways, let's be honest, we are not sure if everyone is lovable. Even if we believe God can do this, we aren't sure we can.

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I wonder, if the subtlety of the language of John 21 is reminding us that... committing to living out honest love for the people we actually encounter (and get to know) **is far more challenging** than signing on to the general statement that we will *love our neighbour as ourselves*.

Was Peter's hurt more about his own self-realization that practical compassion is far more challenging than theoretical compassion?

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

Food for thought.

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Remember I said earlier that, at some point in their years together, Jesus started calling Simon, Peter. I noticed in today's reading that - although the narrator refers to this disciple as Peter, when the risen Jesus addresses him on the lakeshore, he is called Simon, son of John.

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After the glow of Easter faded, and Peter had returned to his fishing village, he had trouble imagining how his years with Jesus would impact his life moving forward, beyond his own personal spirituality. Simon had followed Jesus and fished for people and for a while he was Peter. Now, without Jesus day-to-day guidance, Peter was returning to Simon's old job, fishing for fish... even it was going to take a little while to get the hang of it again.

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Peter turned back the clock. And so did Jesus.

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Jesus (once again) called Simon, the son of John, on the edge of his normal life (The lakeshore) to follow: this time... adding shepherding to his resumé.

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Jesus had been the good shepherd; Peter was the fisher of men. Now, post-Easter, the followers of Jesus would take over the shepherding role.

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To follow Jesus in the easter morning light of the empty tomb is to be a loving shepherd!
Simon Peter solidified his role as Jesus' rock when he agreed to this new job.

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In the years that followed, not everyone appreciated the shepherding that Peter and the others were doing. There were groups of religious purists who raised concerns that these growing numbers of followers of the Way of Jesus of Nazareth advocated the destruction of the temple and changing the customs that handed on down by Moses.

After one of the new generation of post-Easter disciples, Stephen, was stoned to death for his beliefs, Saul (a Hebrew, Roman citizen from Tarsus) sought permission from the high priest to seek out and arrest more *Followers of the Way* rumoured to be connected to the synagogues in Damascus.

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What we heard in the Acts reading this morning was an account of how Saul went from being a persecutor of early christians to selflessly proclaiming the good news of the Risen Christ.

On the road to Damascus, Saul literally closed his eyes on his past and was guided into a new purpose where his were opened to a new light.

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I think - that fourteen days into 2019's Easter season - our scriptures are shining a fresh guiding light for the would-be followers of Jesus, the Risen Christ.

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

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We are to be more than the broad goal of agapé loving our God and our neighbours as ourselves.

We are also to tend the flock we share; to feed each other; to build community through philia love... compassion that is relational, interactive, and challenging.

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Let us pray:

We meet you, O God, in the ebb and flow of life. No matter how we are, you are there: our guide, our host, our promise, our hope. Amen.

#113MV "Fish With Me"