

Resurrection Beyond the Church

John 13:21-25

John 19:25b-27

John 20:1-10

John 21:20-22

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on March 23, 2008, Easter Sunday, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

John 13:21-25

...Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.” The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?”

John 19:25b-27

...[S]tanding near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

John 20:1-10

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

John 21:20-22

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!”

The Gospel of John depicts two disciples whose relationship with Jesus is nearly at polar opposites from one another.

First is the familiar Peter. As he is depicted in the other gospels, Peter is fiery and tempestuous.

- It is Peter who says: “You will never wash my feet” but then, when Christ tells him that in order to share in his life and ministry, he must allow Christ to wash his feet, Peter says: “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.”¹

¹ John 13:1-12.

- When Jesus is arrested, Peter draws his sword and cuts off the right ear of the slave of the arresting officer, drawing immediate rebuke from Jesus.²
- A few minutes later, Peter says to Christ: “I will lay down my life for you”³ but then, later that evening, standing outside the courtyard where inside Christ is on trial, Peter denies three times that he even knows who Christ is.⁴

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Nearly opposite Peter in tone, temperament, and loquaciousness is the one John describes to as “the disciple Jesus loved.”

- The Beloved Disciple appears only in John’s Gospel, and John never gives us his name.
- As we heard earlier in this service, the Beloved Disciple reclines next to Jesus at the Last Supper.
- So close is the Beloved Disciple to Jesus that Peter instructs another disciple to ask the Beloved Disciple if he knows who it is that will betray Jesus.
- Later, at the crucifixion, Jesus looks down from the cross; sees his mother and the Beloved Disciple standing below; says to his mother: “Woman, behold thy son”; and then, to the Beloved Disciple, “Behold thy mother.”⁵

In contrast to Peter’s tendency to speak and act before he thinks, the Beloved Disciple seems quiet, calm, mysterious – in both his relationship with and devotion to Jesus Christ.

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At the end of John’s Gospel, the contrast between these two takes on a deeper, more significant form.

Despite all his fits and failures, Peter is forgiven by the risen Christ and restored to a position of leadership among the disciples, as Christ tells him – three times in parallel with his three denials – “Feed my sheep; feed my sheep; feed my sheep”⁶ – one of the greatest occurrences of rehabilitation in the Bible.

While it is in Matthew that Peter is given the “keys to the kingdom” and told that on his “rock-like” name the church will be built,⁷ John ends his Gospel as well with the forgiven and rehabilitated Peter being both the de-facto head of the church and its greatest symbol.

Yet after Jesus has forgiven Peter and charged him to assume leadership of the church, Peter sees the Beloved Disciple standing nearby.

Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?”

In rebuke, Jesus says to Peter: “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Feed my sheep.” This is the last conversation -- these are the last words – Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John: “What is that to you?”

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What do we make of these two disciples? What do we make of Jesus’ rebuke to Peter? And what does the contrast between these two disciples have to do with us on this Easter Day?

William Placher is a Professor of Religious Studies at Wabash College in Indiana, one of the many Presbyterian colleges that dot the landscape of our nation. Placher is an active Presbyterian layperson. Of the contrast between Peter and the Beloved Disciple, he writes:

Peter stands for the hierarchical organization and rules about who is included and who is excluded, which Jesus’ followers will need to develop if the church is to survive through history.

[In contrast], the [Beloved Disciple] reminds readers...that human rules can never encompass God’s grace.

Placher goes on to say that Jesus’ response to Peter – “What is that to you?” – reminds us

² John 18:1-11.

³ John 13:36-38.

⁴ John 18:15-27.

⁵ John 19:26-27.

⁶ John 21:15-19.

⁷ Matthew 16:13-20.

...that no structures or institutions, no matter how necessary...can encompass the mystery and the startling love of Jesus still at work in the world.⁸

What I hear Placher saying is that the institution of the church, represented by Peter, is *necessary*.

- Our traditions
- Our theological formulations and standards
- Our forms of worship
- Our forms of government
- Our attempts to pass the faith on to our children
- Our common life together
- Our care for the sick in our midst and the hungry at our door
- Even our rules and regulations, laws and ordinances,

are all necessary, in [Placher's] words, if we are to "survive through history."

But I also hear Placher reminding us that as wonderful as the Christian church is, the church is not the only institution that contains the truth of Jesus Christ. Sometimes the truth of Christ lives outside the norms and traditions of the church, symbolized in this gospel by the quiet, mysterious figure of the Beloved Disciple.

"What about him?" Peter asks.

"What is that to you?" says Jesus. "You feed my sheep and I'll take care of him."

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My friends, I love the church of Jesus Christ, particularly in its Presbyterian incantation, especially in that part of it known as Westminster Presbyterian Church of Alexandria. The church is what gets me up in the morning and keeps me awake at night.

But over the years, as I have come to know its strength and weaknesses, as it has shown me my strengths and weaknesses, I have come to appreciate that the church's ministry does not exhaust Christ's activity and presence in the world.

- We, the church, cannot fully contain who he is, what he does, how he touches and moves people and events about whom we know very little.
- The life and activity of Christ in the world is bigger than we in the church are able to understand, to embody, to proclaim, even when we are at our best, and certainly when we are at our worst.

Just as Jesus pointed out to Peter that in the Beloved Disciple, there is an experience of resurrection beyond that of his own, Christ points out to us, through the contrast between these two disciples, that his resurrection impacts the world in ways that transcend the action and vocabulary of church, the words and deeds we hold so dearly and seek so earnestly to live.

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Like many of you, I was introduced to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in college.

- This classic novel chronicles the psychological and spiritual punishment that Raskolnikov, an unemployed student in St. Petersburg, receives for his crime of killing an elderly pawnbroker and her sister.
- Alienated from his friends and family, Raskolnikov is befriended by a young woman named Sonia, who has been forced into prostitution to support her own family. Over time, Sonia gives Raskolnikov a New Testament, reads the story of Lazarus raised from the dead to him, and, when he finally confesses his crime, gives him a cross.

The story ends with Raskolnikov in prison in Siberia. After nine months of receiving visits from Sonia, Raskolnikov experiences a breakthrough on one of her visits:

How it happened – he did not know. But all at once something seemed to seize him and fling him at her feet. He wept and threw his arms round her knees.... They were renewed by love; the heart of each held infinite sources of life for the heart of the other.

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⁸ William C. Placher, *Jesus the Savior* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 179. Thanks to Ted Wardlaw for pointing us to this in his paper at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar in January 2008.

On the evening of the same day, when the barracks were locked, Raskolnikov lay on his plank bed and thought of her. He had even fancied that day that all the convicts who had been his enemies looked at him differently; he had even entered into talk with them and they answered him in a friendly way....

...

Under his pillow lay the New Testament. He took it up mechanically. The book belonged to Sonia; it was the one from which she had read the raising of Lazarus to him. At first he was afraid that she would worry him about religion, would talk about the gospel and pester him with books. But to his great surprise she had not once approached the subject and had not even offered him the Testament. He had asked her for it himself not long before his illness and she brought him the book without a word. Till now he had not opened it.

He did not open it now, but one thought passed through his mind: "Can her convictions not be mine now? Her feelings, her aspirations at least. . . ."

...At the beginning of their happiness at some moments they were both ready to look on those seven years as though they were seven days. He did not know that the new life would not be given him for nothing, that he would have to pay dearly for it, that it would cost him great striving, great suffering.

But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life. That might be the subject of a new story, but our present story is ended.⁹

I first read these words in my late teens, when Bill Gates was still a student and neither Microsoft Word nor the Internet were available for the quick retention of information. I copied these words onto a yellow legal pad and carried them around in my briefcase for over two decades. They describe – as powerfully as any description I have read – one person's experience of resurrection, one person's rescue from crime and punishment into a life of hope, joy, and love.

For Raskolnikov, the experience occurs outside the church, beyond the church, in a prison cell.

In our world, the setting for resurrection can be anywhere:

- A battlefield in Iraq
- An AIDS clinic in DC
- An orphanage in Kenya
- A wedding chapel in Las Vegas
- A ballroom lobby in Atlanta
- A storefront church in New Orleans
- A Gothic cathedral in southern France
- A tiny room in a nursing home next to a dying roommate in Alexandria
- A memorial service in a rose garden.

Whatever the setting, inside the church or outside the church, when the resurrection of Jesus Christ touches us, and when, like Raskolnikov, we lay claim to its touch, it is indeed for us:

- the beginning of a new story,
- the story of the gradual renewal of a [human being]...
- [the story] of [our] passing from one world into another, of [our] initiation into a new unknown life.....
- [the story in which] even [those] who have been our enemies look at us differently, [and in which] we talk with them and they [answer]...in a friendly way.

The resurrection is such a powerful story that the church can neither contain it nor limit its scope and reach. It is larger than Peter, larger than the Beloved Disciple, larger than you, larger than me. We can only bear witness to it by telling of it over and over and over. It is – and we celebrate today – resurrection beyond the church. I invite you, like Raskolnikov, to claim it for yourself.

Amen.

⁹ Fyodor Dostoevski, *Crime and Punishment*, available at <http://pd.sparknotes.com/lit/crime/section40.html>.