

QUO VADIS

It is my hope that you have met Peter in deeper places and know him better than you did before. Some of you, I know, have meditated on Peter's pilgrimage far beyond what I have been able to put into these sermons. You are a wonderful congregation to preach to – not because you sometimes agree with me, but because you really seem to know what a sermon is for, and then you take it from there. What a delight to find one's self among fellow pilgrims.

What I hope you will remember most from this series on Peter is that there are many levels of conversion – and that each one is followed by a period of reconstruction, a time when we must reorder our living. And each level leaves us with a clearer vision of our mission and ministry, which is not to say that it is as clear as we would like it to be. In any case, we can always be sure that another conversion is on its way. Walking with our Lord is never “all cut-and-dried.”

Many exciting things happened to Peter that we have had no time to mention. Many revelations came to him that we have not touched upon. Yet the four major phases of his Christian pilgrimage are clear enough for us to gain great insight into our own journeys. I have no new surprises today. I just want to pick up some of the loose ends, and gather together some of the threads that I myself want to remember.

I.) IT IS A WALK INTO THE UNKNOWN

If you go to Disneyland, you can pay a small sum for the privilege of a mini-adventure. That is, you can take a journey that is preplanned to be both interesting and safe. You have reasonable assurance that you will arrive again all in one piece, and that you will end up exactly where you started. Disney spends millions, and makes billions, to provide fake pilgrimages. All hunger for adventure is really hunger for pilgrimage, and deep is the hunger. The lines stay long, year after year.

But as we all know, true pilgrimages do not seem as safe to us. In the long run, they are much better planned and far safer. But humans always have more trouble with long runs than with short

runs. Why else would faith (trust) be so essential? In any case – for us, to follow Jesus is to walk into the unknown. The closest we come to a chart or map is looking at the stories of those who have gone before us, as we have tried to do with Peter.

It seems clear that through most of it, Peter did not see what God was doing with him. Sometimes he got glimmers, and sometimes he thought he understood when he really did not. He did not know where or how it would end. I doubt that Peter knew at all how much he accomplished. When he thought it was most, it was sometimes least. When he thought it was least, it was sometimes most. Do I see about 130 Simon Peters sitting here before me?

It seems important, at least to me, to remember that going with Jesus is to walk into the unknown. We can be very certain that we will not come back to where we started. We have God's promise for a final, far-off security, but we have to trust God enough to live in the present as if that security and peace were in and all around us now, or we would not even be able to go on the pilgrimage past a step or two. Yet we hold such promises in the tenuousness of human minds and hearts. Sometimes, when I do not understand what is going on – when the road seems hard and the Kingdom looks frail and weak – it is good to *remember* that I do not understand what is going on. As with Peter, we long to know. But that is not our responsibility. Sometimes all God needs or expects from us are the devotion and the will to keep walking. In fact, it is almost always that way just before a crucifixion – just before each new conversion. Invariably, we feel most blind just before God's light breaks forth anew. This is no theory of mine. We have endless sayings to this effect: "It is always darkest before the dawn." "Don't leave before the miracle happens." And so on. Of course, there is also a blindness that is willful and rebellious. But that is a different animal. And they are not easily confused, since pride and humility do not feel the same way at all. In any case, "walking in the light of the Lord" means that *He* sees – not always that we do. All we really know for sure is that if we follow this Jesus, our lives will turn out to be very different from what they would otherwise have been like.

It is important to know and expect the Christian pilgrimage to be this way. To follow Jesus is to walk into the unknown. It is not because Peter was stupid or because we are stupid, though that is

often what we try to tell ourselves. It is because He sees so far beyond our sight. It is also because all that we have experienced and known is in a realm at least partially alienated from God. The phases of the Christian journey are essential because the journey itself means moving from conscious awareness in a physical realm to conscious awareness in the spiritual realm. That is why the pattern itself is a series of conversions – transcendent leaps – after coming to a place of bankruptcy ... to break points. Physical-realm levels of awareness keep leading us into blind alleys and dead-end streets. Conversion is when the Spirit lifts us out, and we find ourselves growing and moving on a different level. That is why I always wince when somebody suggests a reduction of the Christian Faith that makes it sound like some mild, humanistic truism. Like: “God helps those who help themselves.” (Help yourself? To what? More mashed potatoes and gravy? And what a very nasty thing to say to someone who really is in a true spiritual crisis.) If you can help yourself, you do not need God – and you certainly do not need a Savior. God helps those who cannot help themselves – at least not enough.

Jesus calls us into the many phases of the Christian pilgrimage on purpose, or at least I have come to believe that this is true. Can you ever forgive Him for that? Jesus preached and taught and called His disciples into a ministry He knew would fail (on our level – from our perspective). Telling it like it is: Jesus led Peter into a life that would be too much for Peter, and He did it on purpose. Jesus knows that every mother’s son and daughter who hears the Call of the Kingdom will commit themselves to a road that dead-ends in some bitter night of brokenness and denial. Have you heard the rooster’s cry?

If Jesus’ own road had not been the same – if He had not also gone through Gethsemane and to the crucifixion – we could never forgive Him for the pilgrimage He calls us into. There would be no way we could trust Him ever again for calling us to hope and love too high – for calling forth our idealism and every shred of spiritual hunger within us. It does not fit in this world. It will only cause us to see ourselves, and most of what is going on around us, in a light we cannot abide, cannot stand. You have heard of the Damascus Road? And Jesus does that to us on purpose.

The road does not really dead-end, of course. It leaps to a new dimension – to resurrection. After the bitter night, Peter discovered GRACE, and a whole different way to perceive and live for the Kingdom. We are not saved by the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount or any of the precepts that Jesus Himself taught. We are saved by the grace and love of a Risen Christ. Only, there is no way to know or experience it except to come through the bitter night of brokenness and denial ourselves. We cannot do this for each other, and we cannot do it by merely reading about it or thinking about it. Isn't *that* a fine kettle of fish?! (*Selah*) Jesus did not come to tell us what He came and told us. He came to *show us* and to lead us into something far deeper – something we can in no way hear or understand until we follow Him. And following Him will lead us first into dead-ends, bitter tears, and broken pride.

What Jesus shows us is far greater than what He tells us. Some people never figure this out. Lots of the teachings end with things like: “*Bring my enemies here and slaughter them in my presence.*” (Luke 19:27) But what Jesus shows us is: “*Father forgive them*” and “*This day you will be with me in paradise*” and “*Into Thy hands I commit my spirit.*” Some people never make the switch. They still think it is about sending the enemies to Hell, instead of being about getting all of us out of Hell and into Heaven.

What Jesus shows us is far greater than what He tells us. It is not that the misleading is a game or that there is some other way. It is simply inevitable, if we are to awaken at all. It can be said of the Christian Life that, in truth, “You cannot get there from here.” There is no human road that leads step-by-step to Heaven. It requires the grace and mercy of God. It requires being born anew. It requires the mysterious and almighty power of a love we cannot deserve and can neither understand nor control.

Jesus went on to death and resurrection knowing that His followers would come to Phase Two and Phase Three ... and be lost without grace. There is no hope in our good deeds – no way to live in the Kingdom by our good intentions. Only grace can bridge the gulf between our world and God. That is the pure essence of Peter's story, as it is also the truth revealed in Jesus Christ – the Gospel.

The Gospel is not a story about man's good deeds or high ideals. It is a message about God's mercy and love and power, made

known in Jesus Christ. You already know this, but it would be sad not to see that Peter's life shows and fits the same truth, clear to the hilt.

II.) A GLANCE AT PETER'S LIFE

There is a great deal of information about Peter that is not found in the New Testament. It is also impossible to sort it all out – fact from legend; legend from moralism or theological statement. Even taking this into consideration, it appears that much of what Peter had longed for early in his life came his way after he no longer cared about it. His fame and reputation grew beyond anything he had imagined in his early days. The veneration was embarrassing at times. What would Peter think of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome? Peter had to constantly remind people that Jesus was the source – even as Jesus kept reminding people that God was the source.

Through all this “success,” Peter's life was still constantly in danger. Persecution and prison dogged his steps for the rest of his life. What a sad reward for such a faithful servant. Wouldn't Peter have been better off never to have met or followed Jesus? We know what Peter would have said to that. Are we like Peter in that way also? We hope to be, more and more.

Peter became bold, adventurous – in many ways, fearless. Why does the Christian Faith today so often make people cautious, careful, afraid to take risks, and afraid to make mistakes? Is faith supposed to free us for more life because we trust in Heaven, or shut us down to boredom and tiptoeing around every challenge because we fear Hell?

Not in this church, of course, but have you not known some church members who got so focused on their own goodness, their own perfect records, and their own good example that they had no time left over to follow Jesus? Can this be the same Faith that Peter was into? Peter's bitter night did not have this effect upon him – quite the reverse. The experience of grace set him free! Instead of heading toward some frightened and cautious perfectionism, he went for broke! What is the good of knowing the love of God if it only makes us afraid of human opinions, and afraid to taste LIFE?

Peter had a lot to fear from the world but, knowing the love of God, he did not fear it anymore. Grace is like that. Its effect cuts out more and more of our desires and temptations for things that have no real value, but it also frees us to receive and enjoy true LIFE in gratitude and joy.

III.) AN ENDING

There is an earthly ending to every story. We come to Peter's now. Jesus had already hinted at it: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go."*

That summarizes the whole pilgrimage in some ways. In the beginning, Peter did his own thing. After his second conversion, Peter stretched out his hands more and more to the Lord, and the Lord girded him and sent him on the business of the Kingdom. Until, according to the records outside the New Testament, on June 29th, A.D. 64, under the Emperor Nero, Peter was crucified – head downward, at his own request. Peter did not seek equality with Jesus, as Jesus did not seek equality with God. (Philippians 2:6)

I will read the account from a manuscript called "The Acts of Peter." Some of the language is archaic, but I think you will hear past it and find it interesting in the light of our Lenten meditations. We walk in on the discovery of a plot against Peter's life while he is visiting and strengthening the Christians in Rome.

But while they made these plans Xanthippe discovered her husband's conspiracy with Agrippa and sent and told Peter, so that he might withdraw from Rome. And the rest of the brethren together with Marcellus entreated him to withdraw. But Peter said to them, "Shall we act like deserters, brethren?" But they said to him, "No, it is so that you can go on serving the Lord." So he assented to the brethren and withdrew by himself, saying, "Let none of you come with me, for it will be safer if I escape by myself in disguise." And as Peter went out of the gate he saw the Lord entering Rome; and when he saw him he said, "Quo vadis, Lord?" Which means "LORD, WHITHER GOEST THOU?"

And the Lord said to him, "I am coming to Rome to be crucified."

Peter said to him, "Lord, art thou being crucified again?" He said to him, "Yes, Peter, I am being crucified again." And Peter came to himself; and he saw the Lord ascending into Heaven. Then he returned to Rome rejoicing and giving praise to the Lord, because he said, "I am being crucified," since this was to happen to Peter.

So he returned to the brethren and told them what had been seen by him; and they were grieved at heart, and said with tears, "We entreat you, Peter, take thought for us that are young." And Peter said to them, "If it is the Lord's will, it is coming to pass even if we will not have it so. But the Lord is able to establish you in your faith, and he will lay your foundation on him and enlarge you in him, you whom he himself has planted, so that you may plant others through him. But as for me, so long as the Lord wills me to be in the flesh, I do not demur; again, if he will take me, I rejoice and am glad."

And while Peter was saying this and all the brethren were in tears, four soldiers arrested him and took him to Agrippa. And Agrippa in his distemper ordered that he be charged with irreligion and be crucified. [It is one of the ironies of history that most of the early Christian martyrs were charged with being irreligious. It was because they would not worship the Emperor.]

So the whole mass of the brethren came together, rich and poor, orphan and widows, capable and helpless, wishing to see Peter and rescue him; and the people cried out irrepressibly with a single voice, "What harm has Peter done, Agrippa? How has he injured you? Answer the Romans!" And others said, "If this man dies, we must fear that the Lord will destroy us too."

When Peter came to the place of execution he quieted the people and said, "You men, who are soldiers of Christ, men who set their hopes on Christ, remember the signs and wonders which you saw through me, remember the

compassion of God, how many healings he has performed for you. Wait for him that shall come and reward everyone according to his deeds. And now do not be angry with Agrippa; for he is the servant of his father's influence; and this is to happen in any event, because the Lord has showed me what is coming. But why do I delay and not go to the cross?"

Then when he had approached and stood by the cross he began to say, "O name of the cross, mystery that is concealed! O grace ineffable that is spoken in the name of the cross! O nature of man that cannot be parted from God! O love unspeakable and inseparable, that cannot be disclosed through unclean lips! I seize thee now, being come to the end of my release from here. I will declare thee, what thou art; I will not conceal the mystery of the cross that has long been enclosed and hidden from my soul. You who hope in Christ, for you the cross must not be this thing that is visible; for this passion, like the passion of Christ, is something other than this which is visible. And now above all, since you who can hear, can hear it from me, who am at the last closing hour of my life, give ear; withdraw your souls from every outward sense and from all that appears but is not truly real; close these eyes of yours, close your ears, withdraw from actions that are outwardly seen; and you shall know the facts about Christ and the whole secret of your salvation. Let so much be said to you who hear as though it were unspoken.

"But it is time for you, Peter, to surrender your body to those who are taking it. Take it, then, you whose duty this is. I request you therefore, executioners, to crucify me head-downwards – in this way and no other."

One last time, Peter reverses his former denial and desertion. But though forgiven, he has not forgotten. It seems inappropriate to him even to die in the same manner as his Lord. There is only one Savior, and Peter knows it.

Quo vadis – whither goest thou? That is the question of the faithful. Peter's logic is simple. He does not ask why or wherefore. Where the Lord goes, he will go. That is the purpose of the follower.

QUO VADIS

He does not go to be crucified in Jesus' place. He goes to be crucified *with* Him. It is the last and greatest conversion.

PRAYER

Lord, where do You go today? We who are called to be Your "body" – partly we ask, and partly we know: You go to all the crosses of the faithful, the broken, the lonely, the outcast, the disinherited. Prepare us to go with You wherever You go.

Yet, alone we cannot make it to all of Your appointments. But as Your body, together, we can accompany You to the appointed places – each of us to where You call us – to stand with those You are finding and healing and calling and sending ... and sometimes to suffer for those who do not yet know Your name – to bear witness to those You love and forgive and uphold ... until they know.

Quo vadis, Lord? This day we pray Your prayer together, but in silence, and wait upon Your answer. Amen.