

Lent 2 Year B 2021
February 28, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes, the disciples just don't get it, and this is especially true of Peter. Due to his lack of understanding, we see him resist Jesus' mission multiple times throughout the Gospels. And today's Gospel reading is no different. He just doesn't get it. Jesus is telling the disciples for the first time that he will undergo great suffering, he will be rejected, and killed, and then three days later he will rise again. And the disciples don't get it. Peter goes so far as to rebuke Jesus—to scold or admonish him—for saying these things.

But, I think Peter gets a bit of a bad rap here. Of course Peter didn't want this to happen to Jesus! If we look back to the passage just before this one in today's gospel, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?", and Peter rightly responds, "You are the Messiah." Peter *finally* got it. Peter knew that Jesus wasn't just a friend or some teacher or prophet or healer. This was the Savior, and he was here to redeem the world.

And now, immediately after that moment, Peter is hearing the news that he will lose his Savior and friend. Peter watches his dreams shatter and his hopes disappear. Peter was counting on a messiah who would overthrow the Romans—not a messiah that would die on a cross at the hands of the Romans. Peter had a vision. Peter knew the mission. And suffering, rejection, and death were not part of the plan.

In many churches today, pastors are challenging their congregations to take up their crosses. After all, Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." And so, these pastors say, "So take up your cross: step out of your comfort zone and greet someone you don't know well after church." OR "Take up your cross: dig deeper into your pockets and increase your pledge." OR "Take up your cross: speak up for Jesus and invite a friend to church." But I don't think this is really what it means to take up our cross. Taking up our cross is something bigger.

When we take up our cross, we, like Peter, have to let go of what we *know* to be the vision, the mission, and the plan, in order to embrace whatever it is that God has in store. We like to be in control. We like to know what's coming. We like to know where things are leading, and what's going to happen next.

Of course, in this last year, we've had to give up this control multiple times. We've watched our own dreams shatter and our hopes disappear. Life has been deeply unpredictable, full of moments where we've had to let go of our vision and plans for the future. And looking back on the last year, some people have said that the coronavirus seems to have come about specifically to destroy church life as we know it, drawing on reasons such as the timing of big waves of infections around Easter and Christmas, the lack of ability to gather, especially when technology is difficult for many church members. And while that may be taking things a bit too far, we might find ourselves asking what "normal church life" will look like for us as we move into the future.

Until a year ago, like Peter, we knew the vision, we knew the mission, and the plan, and things were somewhat predictable in our life and ministry here at Trinity and throughout the church. But the coronavirus has changed *everything*. Some of us have spent almost a year unable to set foot into a church building. Some have not participated in any kind of worship over this time. Those that are here or who have joined in our online worship services have had the ability to worship, but it's been anything but normal. And in this time, new habits have developed,

people have polarized even more around political ideas, people have left the church, and people have learned to live without the Word of God ringing in their ears every Sunday. Life is *certainly* different.

And, while we'd like to think that now that we're worshipping in person again, the pandemic is over and we can begin to go back to normal, that's not the case. We are still living in a deadly pandemic. People are still dying, people are still at risk. In our country, over half a million people have died of the virus already, and some predict that another 90,000 will die from the virus by the end of May. We simply can't go back to normal right now because the pandemic is far from over.

But when the pandemic *is* over, and we can gather more safely, and things begin to look more normal, the church especially must be intentional about asking the question, *what will "normal" look like?* What will Trinity look like after the pandemic? Will we just go back to our old patterns and habits pretending that nothing has changed? Or, is this an opportunity to re-imagine our ministry, and to allow God to lead us into something new?

Now, just as a quick aside, this doesn't mean that God somehow caused the pandemic, or that the pandemic is good for us, or anything like that. But I believe that in the midst of this global tragedy, God is present and working, and God has the power to bring about something new.

I can't help but see parallels within the church during this pandemic to Jesus' death and resurrection. Sometimes, certain traditions and practices have to die. Sometimes, we simply cannot go on like we were. In March last year, we suspended worship. It would have been irresponsible to do otherwise. Our weekly in-person worship, as it was, had to die. But in July, we were able to come back to do something new. We joined in outdoor worship and made changes to our worship practices so that we could gather safely. While this was not the end of the journey, it was the beginning of a transformation. We were beginning to grow more flexible. Over time, we've continued to experience this death and waiting and transformation again and again. And when we look to the future, I trust that God is preparing us to do something new. God is preparing us to live into new and resurrected life as a church. What will this look like? I have no idea. When will it happen? It'll take time. God is in control, and so our questions may not have easy answers right now.

But just like our Gospel story where Jesus had to rebuke Peter because his mind was set on human things rather than divine things, I trust that this pandemic will lead us to know more of God's divinity, more of God's sovereignty, and more of God's desire for our lives.

We may not be entirely clear God's vision, or the mission or the plan. We may not feel like we're in control. Certainly, Peter must have felt as though he lost control when Jesus said he would be killed. But through this time, we can trust that God *is* in control, and God's Spirit continues to lead us.

When Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow, it means that we are called to give up our own wants and desires and we are called to embrace God's vision, God's mission, and God's plan for us. We are called to trust that even in the midst of death, God brings new life. We see it again and again throughout the Bible, and this is exactly what Jesus predicts for us today.

Jesus tells us that God brings new, resurrected life out of death, and Jesus calls us to see this in our church and community as we continue through the pandemic. Things may never be the same as they were. Some traditions, customs, or plans may have to die. But as God's Spirit continues to move in this place, God will guide us into new and resurrected life.

That resurrected life will look different. Certainly, after Jesus' resurrection, his physical body was not the same. People didn't recognize him at first, his body still bore the scars of his painful death, and he even maybe had some abilities that he didn't have before. But, Jesus' resurrection was absolutely a good thing. In Jesus' resurrection, God granted new hopes, transformed visions, and expanded missions to Jesus' disciples and all his followers.

The same is true for us as a church. We must deny our instinct to simply "go back to normal". We are called to take up our cross, and to follow God into whatever might come next after the pandemic. Our life, resurrected by God, will look different from before. But God is still at work, and as we follow God's lead into resurrected life, God will transform our hopes and vision and mission to see again the new life that God has promised for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.