



“GOING WHERE YOU DO NOT WISH TO GO”
SCRIPTURE: JOHN 21: 1-19
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, May 1, 2022
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

John 21:1-19

21:1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.

21:2 Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.

21:3 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, but that night they caught nothing.

21:4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

21:5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No."

21:6 He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.

21:7 That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.

21:8 But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

21:9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.

21:10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."

21:11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

21:12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord.

21:13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

21:14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

21:15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."

21:16 A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."

21:17 He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" 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." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

21:18 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."

21:19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Dreams can take us where we didn't know we could go. Strange terrain. Bizarre amalgamations of people and places. Hazy out-of-time interactions. Snatches of words and phrases that hitch on to us like the smell of perfume and stay with us even after we are awake.

Dreams can tell us things we didn't want to hear—in all kinds of ways we don't want to believe or know how to incorporate into our waking lives.

And dreams can show us things we can't unsee—landscapes and interactions, facial expressions and visceral experience.

Dreams invite us to be different in our conscious lives—they call us to move, to stretch, to get up—to wake up to ourselves and the world around us in ways our conscious minds had not yet been ready for—or we thought we weren't ready for—but the dream says otherwise—the dream wants us to pay attention. Dreams are really all about transformation.

You and I, we dream of new worlds night after night—and old worlds melding with those new worlds—and tangled up conglomerations of worlds.

The stories we tell ourselves while we are awake about who we are—well they need our dreams—but we forget that—especially in this particular intellectualizing culture—we are so forgetful and also resistant to the fact that we dream together and that we need our dreams to heal our togetherness.

I dreamed this week of my mother. Since her death, when she comes to me in my dreams, it feels like a drink for my thirsty soul. Not just because I miss her, but because she is with me in mysterious ways these days—and dreams make her presence so immediate, so right here.

In my dream she is in the kitchen of one of the houses of my growing up years. The yellows, the windows, the counter tops, the angle of how I could see her when sitting at the kitchen table—it is all so vivid. It is beautiful and startling to be with her this way again.

We are talking about the day I had had. She is wiping the counter tops after serving a meal and talking to me—reflecting on what I am telling her. In my dream I realized that I had not seen my mom like this in so long. I had almost forgotten this feeling, this way I was mothered. Just being in that space, the memory is reiterated, I am washed in something that I need. And then, out of the blue, my mother does a backflip right there in the kitchen. That is not

something my mother EVER did, but in the dream she is so able, so agile. It is effortless and confident.

Then my sisters and I are driving in a truck. I am in the driver's seat and we are not sure where we are going. I am saying things to try and calm them. Each of them is expressing different anxieties and frustrations about where we are. And a few comments suggest they are frustrated with me. The road gets narrower and narrower, and finally there are cement walls on either side of the road. The side rear view mirror of the truck is knocked back and I can't see behind me anymore.

Finally we come to a place where we cannot go any further. The opening at the end of the cement walls is blocked by things that look like repurposed telephone poles. So I start to back up the truck, with no way to see behind me. I find an opening in the wall on the right side of the road and we drive through it onto what appears to be a construction site and we start walking through a building that is shadowy and dusty and under construction.

We keep walking into rooms with less and less light, with fewer windows. We realize we still are not getting where we need to be. I see a person in the distance in a dusty silhouette, something makes me feel like it is a man, but there are no visible facial features, almost ghostly, with dim light coming through an opening the size of a doorway. I call out to him with something like "how do we get out of here." The figure says something about where to go next. And I wake up.

This Wednesday in Bible Study, I reminded everyone about the unique authority of the Bible—and the freedom of approaching scripture knowing that it is not just words on a page.

In the Presbyterian church we do not believe in a literal reading of the Bible—that's why we pray our prayer of illumination before we read scripture—asking for the Spirit's support, guidance, and mysterious presence to open us

up to what we need to hear. Because what we need to hear shifts and changes over time. The same passage in different times and contexts can spark something new in a person's heart and in a community.

The Bible has a hold on us in unique ways—in ways that call on our thinking selves, and in ways that are beyond our intellect. There are ways to increase our understanding with knowledge about the social context, in the definitions of words, in the patterns of writers, editors, and receiving communities, but the Bible's unique authority is not simply about understanding—it is really about imagination and healing. It is about nurturing the capacity within ourselves and in our collectives to glimpse a better world and then be midwives around God's birthing bed where we are invited to support new worlds being born in our midst.

There is freedom in realizing all these things about scripture—scripture is just one of our ways of connecting with both Divine transcendence and Divine immanence. We can play, we can bring our truth to it, we can dream.

This story the lectionary gives us this third Sunday of Easter is A LOT!

It is more than a resurrection story—it is more than words on a page. It is both accessible and nonsensical. It is full of suggestion and metaphor. It is food for the soul and it is bewildering in its peculiar details. There are many ways to encounter this story—and, as I mentioned to the Bible Study on Wednesday, one of them is that this story could be a dream.

This ended up being where we spent a lot of our time together—in a collective dreamscape—exploring the sights and sounds, the details and invitations with our imaginations open and non-defensive. Dreaming, wondering, playing with the ways we encounter Jesus when we “go deep” (as Dean Presson pointed out) like Peter jumping into the water.

This passage became our collective dream– a portal into how we find the courage to go places we do not wish to go, what it means to follow God’s lead in a dangerous world.

Spirit scooped us up and took us to places we hadn’t expected to go in a Bible study on a Wednesday morning in a Presbyterian church.

Being together in a non-judgmental space made us brave, and open to new worlds we hadn’t yet imagined.

What happens if you spend time with this passage as a collective dream–as your dream, as ours?

The dream is an invitation for a world that struggles to recognize Jesus in our midst, for a world that may have forgotten what it feels like to be in his presence, for a world that may have forgotten what it feels like to be fed and nurtured by him, to be given instruction and to be provoked and challenged by him.

[We need Jesus to occupy our imaginations, we need him to visit us when our defenses are down in the stupor of dreamy sleep.](#) We need him to come and find us in our futile efforts to find nourishment in all the wrong places–how much do we fish off the side of the boat where there are no fish?

We need Jesus to call us to the ancestral fires once more-where we tell stories and remember who we are and remember what we do when we love God.

And like Peter who has no clothes on, like a newborn baby–naked and vulnerable and dependent–like Peter we need to put on our grown up clothes–our big boy and big girl pants on, before we jump into the depths in order to get closer to who God is calling us to be in the world.

And like Peter we need practice, we need rehearsal remembering who we say we are and who we say we love and how that means we must live. [We need healing from the ways we have denied Jesus, the ways we have put Jesus in harm's way, the ways we enable Jesus' brutal death with our lack of courage, with our fear, with our overpowering desire to play it safe.](#)

Like Peter we must come of age—we must mature—even to the point of being taken to places we don't want to go.

This call to come of age, to mature, to put on our big people clothes and dive in—what a beautiful gift that this dream comes to us on GCPC's anniversary Sunday—a day when we mark time, when we savor and celebrate how [God has been moving in the Grace Covenant collective for 69 years now. How are we coming of age, how are we maturing, how are we clothing ourselves for the deep dive that following Jesus requires?](#)

Dreaming of a better world together is what empowers us to be the change the world needs us to be.

This world is full of places we don't want to go—everywhere we turn it feels like the road is getting narrower and the scenarios are getting more like nightmares—Russia threatening use of nuclear weapons. The United States and our European allies are investing more and more resources and weapons into Ukraine. The violence there is escalating in what appears to be another catastrophic white man's world war boiling over as we witness it from the devices that feed us the bitter realities of abusive power and brutality and destruction.

Most of the people on this planet do not want war—but yet we are being taken there.

Most of the people in this country do not want voter suppression—suppression that signals the fact that we do not live in a real democracy—but we are being

taken there—and the truth is we have been there for most of this country’s existence.

Most of the people in this community want better solutions for affordable housing and an economy that does not largely cater to big hotels and developers—but we are being taken there.

Most human beings desire work that is life-giving and space to rest and enjoy life and a way to not be in constant stress, exhaustion, and turmoil about how bills are going to get paid and whether children will ever be able to trust this world. Yet, we are being taken there by an economy that brazenly reiterates its hold on us even during a global pandemic, an economy that captivates us with the promise of material possessions while it sucks the life out of us with no compunction.

We are being taken to places that threaten to annihilate our dreams for a better world.

No doubt the early adopters of a fledgling faith in the early Mediterranean world after Jesus’ death were confronted every day with dream annihilators and with their own struggle to break old habits that just were not working anymore.

And Grace Covenant, in 69 years of being church, has had to learn and adapt over and over again to how the life of faith calls us to changes we didn’t expect and that we may not necessarily want.

We need space and time to share our dreams—to notice how we dream collectively and to hear each other’s dreams.

In my dream my mother’s backflip is a surprise and a messenger—something my unconscious is trying to communicate to my consciousness with a flourish. I am being called to see my past in new ways, to see my mother’s presence and

capacity, to notice her capacity to show me things and teach me things and do amazing things that I may have missed.

The rear view mirror is gone–no longer usable–but I still have to go back to get where I need to go. And going into the shadows, into the under construction parts of who I am and who my community is–that is where I am going–I am in the driver’s seat for my own inner work even though parts of me–parts of me that have been with me my whole life, doubt that I know where I am going.

I wonder how we’re all being called to see our past differently–to learn how to go back into the under construction parts of our collectives and our psyches and use new tools to navigate around the shadows that it is time for us to explore.

Two such vivid dreams–the mother and sister dream and the Jesus on the shore dream–they feel like anniversary gifts for us, Grace Covenant. This year we aren’t looking at the past the same way we have–no picnic outside under the tree. COVID has changed us–and equipped us in new ways–taken us to some places we did not want to go, and yet here we are, called again to dream and to work for a better world.

As we come of age, the same old rear view mirror will not be the tool we have to look back at how our community has been formed and fed. We are being called to trust how God accompanies us in the shadow work that white-dominant churches must do. It’s not really a choice of whether we want to do it, it is a must-do in a world that is languishing from generations of white supremacy terror.

We don’t need performative wokeness–we need grown people awake to ourselves and to each other. Then we can get where we need to go together.

Thanks be to God.