

Module 7

PASCHAL MYSTERY

Thesis Statement:

The Paschal Mystery (Jesus' passion, death and resurrection) must not be understood separately from the rest of his life and ministry. Rather, they must be seen as the ultimate expression of his dedication to his mission of the Kingdom of God.



Section 1: Why Was Jesus Killed? [A Historical Question on the Causes of Jesus' Death]¹

Section 1A - Persecution: The Context of Jesus

Jesus' preaching and activity represented a radical threat to the religious power of his time, and indirectly to any oppressive power, and that that power reacted. Jesus was essentially "a man in conflict," and because of this he was persecuted. This man in conflict got in the way, and, in the simple words of Archbishop Romero, "Those who get in the way get killed."

Mark mentions the persecution of Jesus very early in his Gospel. After describing the fifth controversy, he shows the reaction: "The Pharisees went out, and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (Mk 3:6). Even earlier, they already "watched him, to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him" (Mk 3:2).

The evangelists describe how many of the questions the scribes and the Pharisees ask Jesus are designed to put him to the test, to observe him and find a saying they could use to accuse him (Lk 11:53ff). Thus they put him to the test in connection with divorce (Mk 10:2; Mt 19:3), with a sign from heaven (Mt 16:1; Mk 8:11; Lk 11:16), with healing on the sabbath (Lk 14:1).

The culmination of this gradual persecution is clear in the Synoptics. Once Jesus is in Jerusalem, it is clear that plots against him are multiplying, and that the leaders want to get rid of him: "The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him" (Mk 14:1; Mt 26:3; Lk 22:1).

Section 1B - Awareness of a Probable Death

Jesus knew that the persecution against him could lead to death. Nevertheless he stood up to the persecution, which confirms his faithfulness to God and the depth of his compassion for human beings.

Fear of a possible tragic end presented itself to Jesus after what happened to John the Baptist. Mark and Matthew testify to the deep impression made by Jesus by the violent death of the Baptist, which may have been interpreted by Jesus as also an omen for him. After hearing the news of John's death, Jesus withdrew to a lonely place (Mt 14:3; Mk 6:30).

Jesus is aware, moreover, that what happened to John was no accident, but the fate of the prophets. He recalls the failure of Elijah and Elisha (Lk 4:25-27), denounces those who persecute and kill prophets (Lk 13:34; Mt 23:37). Jesus thus not only announces hope for the poor, but persists in this, despite persecution, because this is God's will. This fact allows his death to be interpreted as freely accepted and as an expression of love.

Section 1C - The Meaning Jesus Attached to His Own Death

What did Jesus think about his death? The historical Jesus did not interpret his death in terms of salvation. Jesus perceives the will of God, his Father, which asks him to persevere to the end in the role he has entrusted to him. While he seems not to have either "willed" or "desired" death, he faced it clearly as the path of radical fidelity.

In the Gospel texts it is impossible to find an equivocal statement of the meaning Jesus attached to his own death, since the majority of these texts are strongly marked by the post-paschal situation in which a clear transcendent saving dimension was already being ascribed to Jesus' death. Nevertheless there are signs of what Jesus thought in the account of the Last Supper, interpreted in relation to the whole of Jesus' life.

¹ Adapted from Jon Sobrino, "The Death of Jesus: Why Was Jesus Killed?," in *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 195-211.

From a historical point of view, Jesus, on the evening before he was captured, organized a solemn supper, which he accompanied with a blessing and gestures and words of farewell. The “testamentary” form of these words express the desire of the person bidding farewell to guarantee the continuity of his life and the continuance of his person among his friends.

Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God” (Mk 14:25). Jesus expresses the certainty of his death, on the one hand, and on the other his eschatological hope for the definitive coming and triumph of the Kingdom of God. Death does not nullify his hope.

In the texts about the institution of the eucharist, they tell us that the bread—Jesus’ body—is “given for you” and that the wine—his blood—is “shed for many,” “for forgiveness of sins,” as a “new covenant.” The text contains an important historical core: Jesus says that his life is “for” (ὑπὲρ, *hyper*) others. Jesus understands his life as service, and in the end sacrificial service.

This connection of a life and death devoted to service appears in other passages. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). Jesus interprets his own death as service, the continuation and culmination of his life. Thus, in his death Jesus shows that he is faithful to God and a person who serves others to the end.

Section 2: Why Did Jesus Die? [A Theological Question about the Meaning of Jesus’ Death]

Section 2A - Introduction to Soteriology

What was Jesus personal stance toward his death? We affirm in the Second Eucharistic Prayer that truly it was “a death he freely accepted” and the International Theological Commission articulated this clearly: “If, for Jesus, the Passion was a failure and a shipwreck, if he felt abandoned by God and lost hope in his own mission, his death could not be construed then, and cannot be construed now, as the definitive act in the economy of salvation. A death undergone in a purely passive manner could not be a ‘Christological’ saving event. It must be the consequence, the willed consequence, of the obedience and love of Jesus making a gift of himself.”²

To complete any survey of Jesus Christ, his life and work, we must turn explicitly to the question of Christ’s saving work. How does Jesus Christ save? This is the topic of soteriology, the study of the saving work of Christ. In classifying soteriologies, it is useful to ask what aspect or aspects of Christ’s existence are seen as salvific. The four major points of reference are Christ’s incarnation, public life, crucifixion, and resurrection, either alone or in some combination.³ Cohesively, we must not see Christic soteriology apart from these four aspects. Rather, we take all four truths of the faith together. It is the incarnation that allows for divine entry into the world. It is the public ministry that revealed the program of reform known as the Kingdom of God. And it is Jesus’ fidelity to that Kingdom that granted him strength to accept freely his death, which will eventually lead to his resurrection, God’s definitive affirmation of Jesus and his message. For the sake of this discussion, we shall focus only on the paschal mystery soteriologies, focusing on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

² See “Select Questions on Christology,” in Michael Sharkey, ed., *International Theological Commission: Texts and Documents: 1969-85* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 197.

³ Cf. Cornelius Mayer, “Von der satisfactio zur liberatio?: Zur Problematik eines neuen Ansatzes in der Soteriologie,” *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 96 (1974): 405-14.

Section 2B - Biblical Soteriology of the Crucifixion⁴

Death of a Prophet-Martyr

Consistent with Jesus' status as a prophetic figure, one pattern of thought took recourse to the Old Testament experience that prophets often encounter rejection and even violent death. The sufferings of Jeremiah are a case in point, though Jeremiah's trials stop short of execution. In the New Testament, Jesus' lament over Jerusalem (Luke 13:33-34) and Stephen's speech to the high priest (Acts 7:51-52) express the general theme of persecution of the prophets, and the parable of the vineyard (Mark 12:1-12) places Jesus' death in this traditional context. While development of this line of thought can suggest that a prophet-martyr's woes have salvific value for others, the basic point is that persecution and death do not undermine prophetic standing; on the contrary, genuine prophets must expect opposition. Jesus' crucifixion does not disprove his claim to represent God.

The Death of the Righteous Sufferer

Prominent in the psalms of lament (e.g., Ps. 22) and in the wisdom literature (e.g., Wis. 2:12-20; 5:1-23) is the theme of the current travail and eventual triumph of the righteous sufferer. To outward appearances utterly abandoned, the victim is eventually vindicated by God. The theme can involve simply the suffering of the innocent, as in the Book of Job, or persecution of the righteous precisely because of their justice. Readily applicable to the death of Jesus, these ideas exercise formative influence on the passion narratives, and are reflected with particular clarity in the Gospels' accounts of the crucifixion (Matt. 27:46-48; Mark 15:34-36; Luke 23:46-47; John 19:28-30).

An Atoning, Redemptive Death

The chief Old Testament background for the understanding of Jesus' death as redemptive is the fourth servant song of Second Isaiah (Isa. 52:13-53:12): "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (52:5). Here salvific effects are attributed to suffering which benefits others and atones for sin. New Testament references to Jesus' death as ransom (Mark 10:45) and expiation (Rom. 3:25), as death for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3), and as death "for many" (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24) or "for you" (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:24) reflect this strand of thought, which centuries later gave rise to Anselm's theory of satisfaction. While the first two types may maintain that Jesus is salvific despite his death, the third approach explicitly recognizes salvific value in the crucifixion.

Contemporary Soteriology

Soteriology has gone through several changes particularly due to the changing context of the times. Some theologians begin to question the salvific nature of the cross, saying that salvation came about despite the Cross (eg. Edward Schillebeeckx) while others say that the cross is salvation, that in itself salvation can be found, because it is the most solid evidence of the love of God (eg. Moltmann). However, to say the cross is automatically salvific is to deny the resurrection. And to say that the cross is absolute evil is to deny the importance of the cross symbol in current Catholic devotion. Therefore, we approach the cross through a middle road, which is the law of the cross.

⁴ Adapted from John P. Calvin, "Jesus Christ," in *Systematic Theology Volume I*, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Calvin eds. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 295-7.

*Bernard Lonergan and the Law of the Cross*⁵

In the final thesis on a course on Christology (entitled *De Verbo Incarnato*) that Lonergan taught in the Pontifical Gregorian University in the early 1960s, he attempted to offer an explanation to how Jesus of Nazareth saves us from the reality of sin. Lonergan names his proposal the law of the cross which he expresses as follows:

The Son of God thus became man, suffered, died and was raised because the divine wisdom ordained and the divine goodness willed, not to take away the evils of the human race through an exercise of power, but to convert these evils into a certain highest good through the just and mysterious Law of the Cross.⁶

Basically, Lonergan's law of the cross breaks down into three simple steps aimed at transformation:

- a) Sin produces evil effects in human life, most notably death
- b) The death produced from sin, if accepted and borne out of love, can be transformed into something good. When faced with evils and death, the possible responses will include:
 - i) retaliation - Play the game according to the rules. Meet muscle with muscle, hostility with hostility, violence with violence. Do everything to survive. Give the expanding process of dehumanization and alienation another spin.
 - ii) flight - Capitulate. Back track. Give up. Apologize. Admit defeat. Tell them they were right all along - you were wrong. Go with the flow. Save yourself.
 - iii) love - Refuse to accept those terms of the game. Refuse to continue the spiral of violence. Refuse to continue the spiral of violence, even if it costs you your life.
- c) This transformed dying receives the blessing of new life

The three points are exemplified perfectly in the case of Jesus

- a) The unorthodox lifestyle of Jesus so radically challenged the religious leaders of the time, that they began to put into practice "the dehumanization operative in the narrowness and distortions of the worlds they constructed. Acting out of violence embedded in these worlds, they grew murderous. Sin leads to death, and people whose identity is defined by their status and wealth grew violent in defending the system that favors them."⁷
- b) Rather than contributing to the ever growing cycle of sin, Jesus short circuits it in his own person. This is the second step of the law of the cross. Jesus accepts his death out of love for *Abba* and out of a responsible love for his fellow human beings. By his deliberate refusal to join in the game of retaliation, Jesus' dying was transformed. Instead of being just another violent example of a desperate attempt to survive, Jesus' death becomes a revelation that some values in life are worth dying for. His death makes a powerful statement that fidelity to God and authentic humanity is more significant than mere physical survival.
- c) The third step of the law of the cross is that this transformed dying receives the blessing of new life. In Jesus' case, the blessing is expressed in terms of God raising the crucified one from the dead. By so doing, God vindicates the whole lifestyle and praxis of Jesus. In other words, his version of humanity which led him to the cross is ratified by God as not futile. His selfless love of the poor, his pro-existent service to the marginalized, and his non-retaliation in the face of violence paid off, being validated by the resurrection.

The law of the cross proclaims that evil cannot be overcome by brute force, as the world would like to believe, but only by love. Jesus' absorption of evil in love is the catalyst that generates a community of men and women who, appropriating his self-giving attitude, refuse to be accomplices to the expansion of dehumanizing violence. Ultimately, people will only be transformed by love.

⁵ Adapted from Eamonn Mulcahy, *The Cause of Our Salvation: Soteriological Causality According to Some Modern British Theologians 1988-1998* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2007),

⁶ Bernard Lonergan, *De Verbo Incarnato*, 552.

⁷ Wiliam Loewe, *Introduction to Christology*, 169.

Section 3: The Resurrection

Section 3A - Phenomenology of the Resurrection: What Happened?

The Pauline corpus highlights the centrality of the resurrection account: “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor. 15:14). Therefore, it is of great importance that the saving work in the resurrection be examined, to recover the meaning behind the event, and its consequence on Jesus and the world.

There is ample proof, even from non-Christian sources, that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified.⁸ Christians believed that his death and burial were not the end, even if that meant ridicule from the world around them (see 1 Cor 1:22-25). They told stories to affirm 1) *the fact that he had been raised*. By means of these stories they instructed and encouraged later generations with the message of 2) *what the resurrection mean to them*. Notice, even the early Christians practiced hermeneutic phenomenology, especially for fundamental events of their faith, such as the resurrection. Thus, this will be the same approach we take.

The next section will explain the Biblical data surrounding the resurrection event.

“Resurrection narratives” differ in kind from crucifixion narratives. While crucifixion narratives, though always permeated with theological interpretation, are in fact accounts of the crucifixion, no canonical resurrection narrative purports to describe the resurrection directly. Apocryphal texts that do describe the resurrection seem convoluted, strange and inadequate. Take for instance an account from the Gospel of Peter:

In the night whereon the Lord's day dawned, as the soldiers were keeping guard two by two in every watch, there came a great sound in the heaven, and they saw the heavens opened and two men descend thence, shining with a great light, and drawing near unto the sepulchre. And that stone which had been set on the door rolled away of itself and went back to the side, and the sepulchre was opened and both of the young men entered in. When therefore those soldiers saw that, they waked up the centurion and the elders (for they also were there keeping watch); and while they were yet telling them the things which they had seen, they saw again three men come out of the sepulchre, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following after them. And of the two they saw that their heads reached unto heaven, but of him that was led by them that it overpassed the heavens. And they heard a voice out of the heavens saying: Hast thou preached unto them that sleep? And an answer was heard from the cross, saying: Yea.⁹

It would be prudent to look, rather, at the canonical Gospels for data on the resurrection. A comparative study of the four Gospels shows that the following elements form the core of each gospel story, no matter how differently they were shaped in the fourfold storytelling traditions of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John:¹⁰

⁸ See Ed Parish Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: The Penguin Press, 1993), 249-75; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday/New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 1:386-406; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 157-61.

⁹ M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953) 52-53.

¹⁰ Francis J. Moloney, SDB, *The Resurrection of the Messiah: A Narrative Commentary on the Resurrection Accounts in the Four Gospels* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013), 139-140.

1. On the third day women (in John only one woman: Mary Magdalene) discovered an empty tomb.
2. A young man (Mark), an angel (Matthew [John: two angels]), or two men (Luke) at the tomb proclaimed to the women (in Mark, Matthew and Luke) that Jesus had been raised by God.
3. The risen Jesus appeared to a number of people. This element is missing in Mark, but tradition is presupposed by the instruction given to the women in Mark 16:7 that they are to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee, where they will see him.
4. The risen Jesus commissions the disciples for their future task, in different ways promising that he (Matthew and John) or his Spirit (Luke and John [the Paraclete]) will be with them always.

From the list of elements that are common to all the Gospels, there is only one that can be subjected to objective historical investigation: THE EMPTY TOMB.

For various reasons, it is widely accepted by many scholars that skepticism should be warranted with regards to the empty tomb narrative. There are many possible causes for an empty tomb. Like a cliché mystery novel, it is possible that the butler did it. Or in this case, within the gospel stories themselves, one hears hints that someone (disciples, see Matt 28:15, or the gardener, see John 20:14-15) had removed the body. Very early in Church history, anti-Christian polemic tales suggested that “trickery” was present and that bodily resurrection is not the only explanation for an empty tomb.¹¹ Other religious speculation of the time suggested, not a resurrection, but rather APOTHEOSIS, the exaltation by God into heaven.¹² This means that for some, their explanation of Jesus’ disappearance is that he was raised into a godlike status (a case can be made for deification). This, however, will run counter to the belief in Jesus as being both fully human and divine, because apotheosis suggests a movement from being fully human to being fully divine.

Another problematic factor is present with the empty tomb: it is women that find the tomb. In the globalized modern world, it is not such a big deal, as equality between genders is already commonplace. However, contextually, within the Jewish world, the witness of women were valueless, and the witness of one woman (in the case of the gospel of John) was even worse. Eventually, in John’s Gospel, Peter further visits the tomb, indicated by John 20:3-8 (or if you are inclined to depend on the authenticity of Luke, check out Luke 24:12, supported by Luke 24:24). However, this further visit does nothing to alter the original experience of an empty tomb, except maybe to generate amazement, fear and puzzlement.

Dale C. Allison has a very important question in his scholarly examination of the empty tomb narrative: “Why were there no witnesses to the resurrection itself? Why were the only witnesses to the empty tomb biased and not wholly credible? Why were there no spectacular or miraculous demonstrations?”¹³

In fact, if we were to place Mark 16:1-8 side by side with the non-canonical account of the Gospel of Peter in the beginning of this section, it would appear that the Gospel of Peter is more theological and more apologetically conscious, despite its convoluted narrative.

However, what is important about the empty tomb is not the narrative in and of itself. It’s importance lies in its relation with a second pseudo-common element of the resurrection in the gospels: THE APPEARANCE NARRATIVES.

¹¹ See Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (London: T&T Clark, 2005) 312.

¹² See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007),

¹³ Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (London: T&T Clark, 2005) 321.

An empty tomb legitimizes and sheds light into the various appearance narratives in the gospels. If the tomb weren't empty, it would be easier to deny the authenticity of every appearance narrative. But the empty tomb becomes positive evidence for the claim of Jesus' appearance, post-resurrection.

How do we classify the appearance narratives? The first issue is whether or not they happened as external event, or merely "purely internal" experience within the disciples. It is hard to prove what actually happened during the appearance narratives, but what is certain is that they did happen! These encounters have been affirmed numerous times across many different traditions (Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, John and even the other New Testament witnesses). The assertion therefore is that all these appearance narratives are not "purely internal" experiences.¹⁴

Our conclusions from the data presented are as follows:

1. There is no "knock-down" objective historical proof for the resurrection events reported in the gospel narratives. "Contrary to the gung-ho apologist, it is possible in theory that Jesus awakened from death, that the tomb was empty, that he appeared to some of his followers, and that historians cannot prove any of this to anyone. And contrary to the evangelical skeptic, it is equally possible, again in theory, that when Jesus died, he died for good, that the appearances were altogether illusory, that his tomb remained forever full, and that historians cannot establish any of this."¹⁵
2. But there is objective evidence that the earliest Church came into existence because of the encounter with the risen Jesus - whatever that means.¹⁶ Jesus' followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences with Jesus, and that is a fact. What led to these resurrection experiences is still questionable at best.¹⁷

Section 3B - Hermeneutics of the Resurrection: What Does It Mean?

The whole point of the resurrection is as follows: it is the response of God the Father to affirm the validity of the mission and ministry of Jesus (in other words, God is saying "na tama lahat ng ginawa ni Jesus," and resurrection is proof of this.)

What does the resurrection mean to Jesus' followers? Its meaning is fourfold:

- 1) First, **the resurrection is the fulfillment of Jesus' promises.** The various passion predictions in the gospels have been fulfilled through the resurrection, which is indicative that the rest of Jesus' promises (especially with regards to the Kingdom of God) will eventually be fulfilled as well. Thus, the resurrection generates hope amongst the disciples of Christ.
- 2) Second, **the resurrection generates doubt and fear.** One of the most encouraging features of the gospel stories of resurrection is the realistic narrative portrayal of fragile disciples. These stories of disciples who struggle to respond to Jesus' demands is a reflection of the lives of early Christians, but it is also a reflection of the lives of Christians since then.¹⁸ "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10).

¹⁴ Raymond E Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 91.

¹⁵ Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (London: T&T Clark, 2005) 339.

¹⁶ Raymond E Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 127-128.

¹⁷ Cf. Ed Parish Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: The Penguin Press, 1993), 280

¹⁸ Cf. Francis J. Moloney, SDB, *The Resurrection of the Messiah: A Narrative Commentary on the Resurrection Accounts in the Four Gospels* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013), 160-162.

- 1) Third, **the resurrection grants forgiveness and initiates mission.** Jesus' threefold questioning of Peter's love (John 21:15-17), was the simultaneous act of forgiveness and mission, post-resurrection, to the disciples. Please read Megan McKenna, "John 21: Jesus and Peter on the Beach," in *And Morning Came: Scriptures of the Resurrection* (Lanham, Maryland: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 137-155.
- 2) Finally, **the resurrection is the Spirit-giving event.** The risen and departing Jesus promises and gives his Spirit to the disciples to guide and strengthen them in his absence. Sounds from heaven and fire accompany the disciples as they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4). This is reminiscent of the theophany at Sinai, where Moses came down the mountain with the law, amid heavenly noises and fire (Exodus 19:18-19), establishing covenant between God and his People.¹⁹ Thus, the resurrection event, coupled with the Pentecost event, is a renewed covenant experience for the establishment of a new People of God, the Church. A new and universal people of God has been founded at a new Pentecost (Acts 2-13).²⁰

"Christianity did not present itself to the world as a religion that lives on the nostalgic memory of a happy event in the past. It emerged as an announcement and a joyful celebration of a presence, that of Christ resurrected. Jesus of Nazareth, dead and buried, does not merely live on by means of his remembrance and message of liberation for the oppressed conscience. He himself is present and lives a way of life that has already surpassed the limitations of our world of death and realized every dimension of all its possibilities. Hence, resurrection is not synonymous with resuscitation, the resuscitation of a body as was the case with Lazarus. Resurrection must be understood as a total, exhaustive realization of human reality in its relationship with God, with others, and with the cosmos.

Christ did not leave this world with the resurrection. He penetrated it in a more profound manner and is now present in all reality in the same way that God is present in all things. Christian faith lives on this presence and has developed a viewpoint that allows it to see all reality as penetrated by the reverberations of the resurrection. Owing to Christ's resurrection, the world became diaphanous and transparent.

In him that which for us will take place only at the end of the world took place in time. He is the anticipated goal."²¹

Section 3C - After the the Resurrection: What Now?

Here we will study the appearance narrative of Jesus, post-resurrection, to his disciples by the beach (John 21). It is an exposition of the renewal of the mission of the disciples, particularly Peter, and how such a renewal extends to modern-day disciples like you and me.

As a starting point in this exposition of Peter's renewal, it might be prudent to look back at an important statement of Jesus. "Do not be afraid." This very same statement that begun Peter's journey of commitment on the shores of Galilee (Luke 5:10) is also the statement Jesus uses to greet Peter and the disciples post-resurrection (Matthew 28:10). Throughout Jesus' public ministry Peter accompanied him. Jesus would constantly reassure Peter with the same words. This was seen evidently when Jesus calmed the storm (Mark 4:40), when he walked on water (Mark 6:50), and when he transfigured into blazing light (Matthew 17:7). In each of these instances, Jesus comforts and calms Peter, and reassures him to "fear not."

This greeting ("Do not be afraid") is actually an instruction that is coupled with encouragement. It is a call to hope when hope is lost. It is a reminder of what one is capable of, for as long as one lets go of hesitations and inhibitions. It is a reminder that those who put their faith in Christ are capable of transcending fear.

¹⁹ Francis J. Moloney, SDB, *The Resurrection of the Messiah: A Narrative Commentary on the Resurrection Accounts in the Four Gospels* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013), 166-167.

²⁰ Cf. Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 41-47.

²¹ Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*.

And this is an important prompt, especially for Peter after the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. The crucifixion event has instilled fear in Peter. Fear is a very powerful force. An encounter with great fear can cause great trauma, stress and distress. It can cause people to abandon their commitments, and return back to old ways of living. This is particularly true of Peter as well. After the death of Jesus, Peter has gone back to his former profession: fishing.

Gathered [by the Sea of Tiberias] together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, 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, but that night they caught nothing (John 21: 1-3).

The others follow his return to fishing as well. The scene has a feel of discouragement, lethargy, filling up time, reverting to old ways.²² The disciples are even named in the same manner they have been in earlier chapters of the Gospel of John, indicative of the reversion being described here (John 21:1-2). This return to old ways for Peter and the rest of the disciples is indicative of the great influence fear can have on the very life of a believer. Fear can prevent people from taking positive action, and this case, the fear that has enveloped Peter after the death of Jesus. As if a reflection of his own struggles, Peter cannot catch even a single fish that night (John 21:3).

For many of the disciples, including Peter, the death of Jesus could be interpreted as a failure, a humiliation and a disaster.²³ The death of Jesus heralded the end of the man they fully believed in and offered their lives too. It reflected as a failure on their part as well. The fear that resulted from the death of Jesus has caused a regression in Peter. Now he is back to fishing, having turned away from the vocation set by Christ when they first met. No longer is he a fisher of men. He is back to fishing for fish. Such was the logical thing to do.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 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. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. 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 (John 21:4-8).

Jesus arrives on the scene. However, he is not recognized by any of them, including Peter. It is evident that the fear that has taken a hold of them all this time has begun to cloud their vision. The inability to recognize Jesus is similar to the other appearance narratives, whether the appearance to Mary Magdalene (John 20:14), or to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:15-16).

In order to make Peter and the rest of disciples recognize him, Jesus performs a meaningful miracle. Jesus tells them the same thing he has said before: "Throw out your net, and you will get plenty of fish." When Peter and the rest of his comrades cast their net, they were not able to haul it back due to the amount of fish they caught (John 21:6). It is reminiscent of the first miracle they witness when they were initially called. Through this miracle, Peter's eyes were opened. He sees the risen Christ, and he believes. Such was his realization that he jumped into the water, and swam ashore as fast as possible, even though it was a hundred yards away from the shore. He was so excited and astounded, that he could not wait. Peter can't just let Jesus wait. The sheer importance of Christ to Peter was not lost all this time. It was just buried under layers and layers of fear and regret. One could just imagine that with every stroke Peter made as he was swimming to the shore, each of these layers would have slowly peeled away, revealing only the courageous and faithful Rock that has always been there all along.

²² Megan McKenna, *And Morning Came: Scriptures of the Resurrection* (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 148.

²³ Cf. Michael Grant, *Saint Peter: A Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 95.

The renewed belief that Peter now carries causes him to see Jesus's death in a new light. It is not anymore a failure, nor is it a humiliating event or a disaster, as previously asserted. Now, the crucifixion, and subsequent resurrection, can be viewed as triumph. It is a new way of thinking. The sight of the risen Christ allowed for the disciples, particularly Peter, to view the crucifixion event not as catastrophic defeat, but as a unique victory. This allows Peter some moral and spiritual insight to live by Jesus' way. The fear that has taken a hold of Peter dissipates, and it is replaced with a triumphant sense of purpose. The resurrection is the reinforcement of Peter's faith.²⁴ The resurrection becomes Christ's ultimate reassurance. The resurrection brings with it a clear message, reminiscent of the time they were out at sea: "Do not be afraid! Take heart! I am here!" (Matthew 14:27)

Jesus called Peter and the rest to have breakfast with him (John 21:12-13). This is an important scene, because to eat with someone is particularly meaningful. To share a meal with someone is to share in their life, and in this case, it is an call to new life with the Risen Christ. None of the apostles and disciples gathered there even bothered to ask who this man inviting them was. Where in the past there was fear and doubt, now there is certainty. They shall not be afraid, for this is Christ with them.

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." A second time Jesus 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." He said to him a third time, "Simon son of John, 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. 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." After this he said to him, "Follow me." (John 21:15-19)

When they had finished eating, Jesus looked as if he had something important to say. He initiates a special conversation with Peter. Jesus asks Peter three times the question "Do you love me?" These sets of questions carry with them a great weight, because in them lie a call to renew the commitment Christ had asked from Peter when they first met. The pattern of this renewed commission was in the form of three questions, as if to offset the three denials of Peter in the courtyard of the high priest in events past. In each case, Peter answers with conviction, "You know that I love you."

After each response of Peter, Jesus commands Peter. The commands are worded in theological language: **1) feed my lambs, 2) tend my sheep** and **3) feed my sheep**. There is a definitive shift from fishing to shepherding.²⁵ Peter has gone back to the life he had before Jesus, the life of the regular fisherman from Bethsaida and Capernaum, but now he is being called to let go of that life, and take on a different task, that will take him far from familiar shores. That is what is being demanded from Peter, who will eventually become the shepherd of the Church.²⁶

The shift from fishing to shepherding, the shift from the familiar to unfamiliar, highlights how sometimes those who commit to Christ are called to do things they do not think they are ready for, or work that they feel they cannot handle. But just like the penultimate exhortation of Christ in this episode, "someone else will fasten a belt around you, and take you where you do not wish to go." This is the challenge of commitment. Just as Peter is led to a task that will involve difficulties, so too will the Christian of today's time who will commit to Christ and the Church. The final command is the key to it all, as Jesus says, "Follow me." That becomes the true nature of the commitment at its core, a commitment to follow Christ even in the midst of adversity.

²⁴ Cf. Michael Grant, *Saint Peter: A Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 95-96.

²⁵ Megan McKenna, *And Morning Came: Scriptures of the Resurrection* (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 151.

²⁶ For a full explanation of the threefold call, please read Megan McKenna, "John 21: Jesus and Peter on the Beach," in *And Morning Came: Scriptures of the Resurrection* (Lanham, Maryland: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 137-155.

By the movement of the Spirit, Peter accepts whole heartedly. His grace-filled acceptance was found in his tenacious answers of “I love you” to all of Jesus’ questions. His acceptance is a testament to the grace that he has received in this redemptive encounter with Christ. It is consistent with the words of Christ at the Last Supper, pertaining to the movement of the Spirit. “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26) Just as the Spirit moved in the heart of Peter, propelling him to the loving renewal of commitment, so too will Christians of this new generation be called to commitment as well. Thus, it will be the narrative of Peter’s commitment that “will remind disciples in every succeeding generation of all that Jesus said and meant.”²⁷

What does the cross of Jesus say? It says that God has drawn near to this world, that he is a God “with us” and a God “for us.” He lets himself be a God “at our mercy.” Jesus’ cross saves because in it the love of God for human beings has appeared with maximum clarity.

-Jon Sobrino

²⁷ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012),