

**Restoration Hardware  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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Text: John 21:1-19**

A certain church had the tradition of beginning their worship services with the pastor proclaiming from the pulpit, “The Lord be with you” and the congregation responding, “And also with you.” One Sunday however the sound system malfunctioned. Tapping on the microphone, the minister, very much annoyed, said “there’s something wrong with this blasted thing,” and the people answered back, “And also with you.”

Exactly six years ago today I preached my first sermon as your pastor. I started out with that joke and you graciously laughed then too, back there in the freshness of beginnings. A lot of water has gone over the dam since then. We’ve shared many joys and not a few sorrows. We’ve sung and prayed and played and worked and dreamed and discussed. We’ve seen some plans bear fruit, some malfunction, and some get stuck on deck. In everything, however, we have tried to be a church led by Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep.

The call to follow him goes all the way back to the freshness of another beginning, the days following the startling news that Jesus who was crucified had been raised from the dead. The band of disciples have seen him, but have not figured out what that means or what they should do now. They’re together, but restless, anxious, uncertain about their next move. Listen for God’s Word to the church in the middle, at neither beginning nor end, as we put vision into action, and seek to be faithful, day after day. A reading from the gospel according to John, in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter at the first verse. [JOHN 21:1-19]

Easter didn’t last very long this year. Despite our great (albeit snowy!) celebration of God’s victory over death, Death reared its ugly head, snarling and relentless, barely a week later at

Virginia Tech. The inexplicable violence on an unprecedented scale hollows our hallelujahs, and reduces claims of resurrection to nothing more than religious speak, completely removed from the real world.

The early church community to whom the gospel was first addressed could surely relate to that. Remember, the first years were marked by persecution, the jackbooted foot of Rome planted firmly on the necks of believers. The kingdom of peace and justice Jesus had proclaimed as “near” seemed just the opposite. The sun rose, and each day looked like any other. By the time the gospel was set down in writing, eyewitnesses to these events would all have been dead. The text seems organized to report the story in ways that would address the concerns of believers who came later. There’s a formulaic quality to it that suggests it was a teaching text for those who would have no corroborating witnesses.

For example, we notice that the close circle of friends who had touched his scarred hands and side and received his blessing of peace not many days before, now began to wonder what difference it made. We see them doing what many of us do when confronted with disappointment: they got busy. It’s Peter, ever the ringleader, who suggested it, and I see him fidgeting, afraid to be alone with his thoughts, and the anguished memory that he had denied even knowing Jesus in the hour of his greatest need. *I can’t stand this—I’m going fishing.* Off they go, back to the familiar tasks that would occupy them and keep their minds off more painful subjects.

Then there’s the fishing. They come up empty until Jesus, enters the scene. Unrecognized at first, he performs a miracle as he has done so often in the past: in which ordinary food is multiplied to the point of extravagant abundance. Then there’s the specificity of the number: 153: what’s up with that? You can hear the minds of biblical commentators whirling. St. Jerome said that Greek zoologists had identified 153 species of fish at this time. St. Augustine noted that 153 is the sum of all the numbers from 1 to 17. Seventeen is the sum of 10 plus 7,

two numbers that symbolize wholeness or completeness. That seems like a stretch, but whatever the interpretation, all agree that the number represents universality. Contemporary scholars have suggested that the detail mentioned later—that the net was not torn despite the vast number of fish—affirms the unity of the church even in the face of a diverse and growing company of people. [*Charles Cousar, et al. Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year C, p. 293*] Jesus Christ fills the void created by sin with God’s extravagant, far-flung love—and unites the whole world.

The scene moves in to a close-up of Jesus and Peter. Peter, whose name means “Rock,” the strong, natural leader whose impulsiveness had been both blessing and curse. He was the first of the disciples to confess Jesus as “messiah,” Son of the living God. Yet in Jesus’ final hours, Peter denied him three times for fear of his own life and safety. Now Jesus asks Peter a question, and it is no mere coincidence that he asks 3 times: *Peter, do you love me?*

Having denied his Lord, Peter is now offered opportunity to declare his love and devotion. Forgiveness. In that dialog on the shore, Peter and Jesus are reconciled, their relationship restored. It’s not for Jesus’ sake that he puts the question three times—as if he must symbolically balance the scales of justice. What’s more likely is that Peter needed to do so in order to forgive himself, to let go of his guilty memory and be able to move on. How hard it is to accept forgiveness! It requires replacing our picture of ourselves as in control, powerful and in charge, with one acknowledging our vulnerability, imperfection, and humility. It’s not the apology Jesus wants, but his promise; not Peter’s regret, but his resurrection.

For their reconciliation is not the end. In fact, it’s just the beginning. A whole new day. And Jesus’ invitation spells out his purpose, his mission, his reason for being.

*Do you love me? Feed my lambs.*

*Do you love me? Tend my sheep.*

*Do you love me....  
love me....  
love me? Feed my sheep.*

Along with the call comes a foreshadowing of its risk and challenge. You will be taken some places where you do not wish to go. It will cost you your life. Nevertheless, follow me.

Friends, Easter will only “last” for us if we understand that Christ’s resurrection is *not* a triumphant ending. It’s not an ending at all. It is a transforming event about the real life process of starting over. We are forgiven, experience a new beginning....and then sent out to serve. The resurrection inspires the church to tend the flock for whom the Shepherd gave his life. The hardware of the cross became the means by which we—and all humanity with us---are restored to new life. Our failures are forgiven. The path emerges clearly before us.

Fairmount’s mission is to serve. We do so following the example of Jesus Christ who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life so that we will have life, abundant and eternal. In many ways, the mission of the church today doesn’t look a whole lot different from the ministry to which Jesus called the disciples so long ago—a ministry that addressed both the physical and spiritual needs of people. Jesus fed the multitudes hungry for bread on the hillside with loaves and fish, yet reminded them that bread alone cannot produce life. So we are called to feed bodies, minds, and spirits. That’s the intent behind “Vision 100” – our strategic plan developed by the Session with your significant input. Vision 100 calls for caring ministries that help us connect with one another more deeply. It calls for educational ministries that immerse us in God’s Word and help us become spiritually renewed. It calls for outreach ministries that open our doors wide with hospitality, acceptance, and service. Jesus didn’t say to tend and care for only the sheep in the fold; the ones like us; the ones we like. Wherever lambs are hungry, suffering, despairing—that is where the church is called to serve. Within 24 hours of the tragic violence at Virginia Tech, the Presbyterian Church (USA) had dispatched trained counselors

to meet with students, faculty and staff as part of a coordinated response effort. The Church was able to respond so seamlessly because of the financial support it receives from its member churches. That line item in our operating plan called “unified mission?”---that’s the money we give for ministries administered by the presbytery, the synod, and the General Assembly of our denomination to carry out Christ’s mission beyond our immediate sphere of influence.

Recently, a church member explained how her family came to be active Fairmount members. They had been life-long Episcopalians, but when their children became teenagers, they were invited by their friends to our youth program and liked it a lot. So much so that they begged the parents to be allowed to go here. A family friend was alarmed by the decision, and counseled, “Don’t join Fairmount—they believe in predestination instead of free will; we offer a comforting relationship with God, and over there it’s just mission, mission, mission!” Well. I guess there are worse characterizations! But the good-intentioned friend didn’t quite get it right. The mission, mission, mission of Christ includes both nurture and service. Jesus told Peter to feed his sheep, but first he fed him at a fish fry. It’s not one or the other: outreach OR spirituality. Our spirits have to be sustained for the mission to which Christ calls us. Presbyterians (including Fairmount Church!) believe God allows us free will to choose what path we will take; what pursuits we will follow, to what passions we will give ourselves. The predestination part means that we recognize that ultimately we are not in charge of the world; God is. The outcomes of our choices, whether we succeed or fail, are in God’s hands. Christ asks of us only that we follow. One way you can say “yes” to that invitation is to become part of Fairmount’s growth. There’s a place for you in Vision 100!

An ancient story from the Jewish tradition puts it well. A faithful believer is discouraged by the widespread suffering in the world, and complains to God. “Even I could make a better world than this one.” And it is said that God responded, “That’s what you’re supposed to be doing.”

Friends, don't try this alone! I am grateful every day that you and I are in ministry together. As we begin our seventh year—and Fairmount's 91<sup>st</sup>-- may our mission be animated by the grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the joy of the risen Christ. Then we can bold face the future, trusting that the best is yet to be!

**NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.**

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