

Leap of Faith

Rev. Dr. Bob Gibson ©
St. Paul's United Church

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Easter

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24 John 20:1–18 The empty tomb.(1074)

The winner of the race is....

“It looks like the winner of the race this morning, on Easter Sunday morning, is going to be “the other disciple.” He looks like he is a couple of feet ahead of Peter. Now what is this” the other disciple” is just inches away from the finishing line, and he has stopped. All he has to do is pass finish line and he will be the winner. What is his problem? He just froze. Something must be wrong.”

This is the way an announcer might have described what had happened one early Easter morning as the other disciple outran Peter to the tomb. The other disciple stops at the tomb, looks in, but fails to run in.

Who is “this other” that outruns Peter but freezes at the tomb? What’s the identity of “the other disciple”. Why isn’t he given a name? I do not know about you, but being ‘the other’ is a little condescending. We would like to call him something, when he is announced from the podium. It difficult to honour, give accolades and recognition to someone who has no name. To be referred to as the “the other spouse, the other child, the other parishioner, the other minister, the other disciple, sort of means you have no identity, no existence, no purpose.

Rummaging through the pages of scripture we learn this about the “the other disciple” He’s named John and he is the twin brother of James. Both of these men were successful fishermen before they abandoned their boats to become fishers of people. They were not as poor as the other disciples were. Their father, Zebedee employed servants. John had more outlets of worldly influence, including an acquaintance with the High Priest in Jerusalem.

Known as Sons of Thunder because of their hot tempers and their ability to fly off the handle when things did not go their way, they belonged to a tribe of young angry men who wanted to upset the established order.

Both of them thought of Jesus as a political Messiah on his way to inaugurate a political kingdom and that provoked them to ask Jesus for best seats in the house when Jesus started his reign.

For three years, John lived in the magnetic presence of Jesus.

He was one of the twelve whom Jesus called to be his companion, to share his ministry of teaching and healing and continue it after his death. He was one the inner circle of three disciples with him Jesus shared some of his more intimate experiences- the rising of Jarius daughter, glory on the Mount of Transfiguration and his agony in the garden of Gethsemane. At the Last Supper in the Upper Room he sat in the place of honour at Jesus right hand and received from the Master a confidence that could not have been shared with the others.

It was to John that Jesus in his dying moments on a cross entrusted the care of his mother with these words to her: "Mother, there is your son and to John" "There is your mother" and from that moment the disciple took her into his home.

On that first Easter morning, "the other disciple" who is referred to as John and known as Beloved because of his close and intimate relationship is winning the race of his life. Until he stops at the tomb looks in, sees the linen clothes, but does not keep running to pick up the prize.

When you are at that close to winning the race, what makes a fellow like John stop short of going into the tomb for a closer look?

Rumours of speculation run rampant.

Maybe he was afraid of the body snatchers who took the body and might return to snatch the cloths.

Could it be that he was in a state of surprise and shock. In a world where we like things black and white, cut and dry, ordered and structured the whole notion of entering a tomb or place to prepare a body and now be surprised and shocked there is no body present.

Could it be he did not want to handle death all over again? The full emotions of emotions came back to haunt him again. He started to remember with enormity what had happened. He remembered the love and care, the teaching and learning, the sharing and the laughing, the pain and the suffering. It all happened in that one tiny moment and he hesitated. He hit a wall; his chest grew tight with the thought of it. He did not want to go back and relive the moment of death all over again

Our reasons for not going into the tomb

There is a point where we can only sympathize with John. For the truth be told about us, we can run the race, even believe are winning, until we have to stop and face looking into a tomb and confronting the reality of death. We freeze. Death scares us. Death numbs us. We stand at the tomb like John wishing for the old days we had with those we love. It is just too painful to face death one more time.

And so we freeze. We linger at the tombs of our failures and disappointments, bewildered and paralyzed, unable to move beyond the fear and despair in our lives. We are just like John when time stands still when it comes to finishing the race.

By then Peter had arrived and entered into the tomb. John awakens from his stupor, follows Peter into the tomb, sees where the linen clothes (shroud) lay and the napkin for Christ's head lying by itself and not with the shroud. He notices the grave clothes were both wrapped and folded in a neatly pile.

Overwhelmed not by finishing the race, but in noticing what he saw, he than believed.

He saw: Had Jesus' body been stolen, the thieves would not have had the time to unwrap Him. The evidence of the intact and not unwrapped grave clothes, both the shroud and the napkin

proved that Jesus Christ rose up, from His sleeping position, right through the wrappings, and then passed through the wall of the tomb in His resurrected glorified body! and believed

He remembered: John lingers at the tomb, long enough to remember the story. He remembered the three speeches that Jesus gave all the disciples before he died. The bottom line in each one of them was on the third day he would raise from the dead. The bottom line was that linen cloth could not keep him in. A stone in front of tomb could hold him in. Not even death itself could have victory over the life of Christ.

He believed: He understood the significance of the folded napkin. When the servant set the dinner table for the master, he made sure that it was exactly the way the master wanted it. The table was furnished perfectly, and then the servant would wait, just out of sight, until the master had finished eating, and the servant would not dare touch that table, until the master was finished. Now if the master was done eating, he would rise from the table, wipe his fingers, his mouth, and clean his beard, and would wad up that napkin and toss it onto the table. The servant would then know to clear the table. For in those days, the wadded napkin meant, 'I'm done'. But if the master got up from the table, and folded his napkin, and laid it beside his plate, the servant would not dare touch the table, because..... The folded napkin meant, 'I'm coming back!'

John understood that Jesus was back. Back in the land of the living, the man we decided to kill is standing among us, says the hymn writer Fred Kaan, forgiving our guilt of the Good Friday hill.

He believed: He could have been singing alongside the late Malahia Jackson when in her powerful voice sings:

I believe for every drop of rain that falls a flower grows
 I believe that somewhere in the darkest night, a candle glows
 I believe for everyone who goes astray
 Someone will come to show the way
 Every time I hear a newborn baby cry, or touch a leaf or see the sky
 Than I know why I believe.

When John stepped inside the tomb, saw the linen cloths he said "I see and believe in the mysterious power of God to bring forth new life

Do you know believe? Are you too afraid to go inside the tomb? What is stopping you to say today, I saw and believed in the power of God to bring forth life?

Easter is about each of us being "the other disciple" The other disciple running to the tomb on Easter morning, afraid to confront death: our death, the death of those we love. Only to remember that it is never about us but about the one who is raised from the grave and raises us from our graves.

It's about the one who wraps us and loved ones in linen cloths of fear and anxiety, and even a casket or urn.

It's about the one whose mysterious power sets us free It's about the one who turns our heartbreak into mending our hearts. It is about being turned from heartache to the hallelujah chorus.

It's about moving from hopelessness to hopefulness; weakness to strength. That is our challenge this morning. Take the leap of faith.

