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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ *Met on the Shores of Despair*

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ Easter, April 24, 2011

John 21:1-8, 15-17

Luke 24:1-5

Those of you who have known me over the years may remember that I can sometimes be directionally challenged. Some of you know that from stories you've heard about me getting lost and some of you know that because you have actually *been* lost with me – okay, *because* of me.

My earliest memory of getting lost was when I was around 4 years old and living in Florida. I had wandered off from home with a couple of older boys who were obviously a bad influence on me (I think they were like 5). I remember we walked down a path and through some woods till we came to a neighborhood we'd never been in before. We got confused and a little scared because we didn't know our way back home so we just kept on walking until we came to a fairly major road – a lot like our Foothill Expressway. At that point we realized our legs were short and we weren't making much headway so we decided to start hitchhiking. Yeah, two kindergartners and a preschooler! *Meanwhile*, my mom was *frantic* and had called my dad at work to tell him that, “Uh honey.. I can't find Steve ...*anywhere*. And so he immediately jumped in his car and started driving home...

You know, I don't remember my dad making it a practice to pick up hitchhikers – but I guess when he saw us on the side of the road with our little thumbs out... well, let's just say we got home faster than we had thought we would!

Then the next year when I was 5 years old I got lost on the campus of the Naval Academy when my family was visiting Annapolis. This time they had the campus police assist in the search. In the end it turned out I had gone back to our parked car and just waited there – you know, just to make sure they wouldn't leave without me. I don't know why my parents couldn't keep better track of me!

Anyway, that was just the *beginning* of my adventures in lostness. *But* listen to this: a couple of weeks ago NPR had a program about how brain neurons work to help in spatial awareness and recognition. And apparently there's a disorder called *Developmental Topographical Disorientation*. So: I no longer have a problem getting lost– I have a neuron disorder.

And I know I'm not alone. All of us at some point have missed a turn or two and become lost which can be frustrating at best. But worse than losing our sense of direction to our goal is

losing our sense *connection* to our God. As frustrating as being physically lost can be, feeling *spiritually* lost – feeling cut off from God – is worse.

It's one thing to *be* lost – that's a spatial problem; it's an entirely different thing to *feel* lost – that's a spiritual problem. And we would miss the power of John's Easter story here if we did not understand that Peter was feeling lost and cut off from God and *that's* why he went fishing.

Luke tells the story of the first Easter morning when the women went to the tomb early before sunrise. This Easter I wanted to focus on John's story because first of all in Luke's gospel the disciples go looking for Jesus but here in John's account *Jesus* comes looking for them. I like that because if I'm honest I have to admit that I don't always search for God in my life. I mean honestly? I don't always want to *see* God. But the good news of the gospel is that God seeks us and in Jesus Christ comes to restore and redeem us!

I also like John's story because it happens, *not* on Easter morning, but at some later time – at some point *after* the resurrection. See Peter and the disciples at this point *knew* that Jesus was alive; they had already spent time with him and talked with him – they had touched him and had already come to believe in his resurrection. They were like us! They were no longer surprised at the Easter miracle– they knew the facts, they were familiar with the story, they knew he was alive *but...* something was missing.

The situation of Chapter 21 essentially begins with what seems to be a casual statement by Peter in verse 3: he says, "I'm going fishing." Now if you're just reading this passage all by itself you might not remember what had just happened about 3 chapters and 10 days earlier, and so this might sound like just a passing comment -- "I'm going fishing" -- not particularly surprising for a man who, until three years before, had made his living as a fisherman. It would seem as natural as hearing someone today saying, "I think I'll go in to the office... *Unless* you knew what had transpired that night when Jesus had been arrested and condemned.

On that night in the upper room during what we have come to call the Last Supper Jesus told Peter that he would soon betray and deny him. Peter couldn't believe it, "No way Lord," Peter said, "Everyone else may leave you but I *never* will!" and yet before the night was over Peter had done just that, not once but three times. Luke tells how when Peter denied him that third time that Jesus turned and looked straight at him. And Peter, realizing what he had done, went out from that place and wept bitterly.

Now, I don't mean to delight in Peter's weakness, but I'm glad the Bible doesn't try to paint him only as a saint because it's in these places where the disciples come up short that I find the most hope for myself because if I am like Peter in any respect it is in his tendency to miss the point and deny Jesus. And so when we find Peter in this text he's out drifting in a boat at night not even able to find success in what used to be his life's work.

Peter is lost: lost without a way to return; without a hope of renewal; without any clue as to how to get back: that's how Peter felt when he said he was going fishing. This was a man who believed he had blown it and was beyond hope; who felt lost from God and cut off from grace.

Now I don't know, but I think most of us have felt that way. Maybe even though it's Easter, maybe some of us feel that way *today*. Certainly we know what it is to believe ourselves to be outside of God's favor because of our failures. And so we go fishing and try to fill the nets of our lives with something else – but it's always something less.

But then? Grace! Jesus meets Peter on the shores of his despair and calls out to him and offers help – offers hope. After breakfast Jesus pulls Peter aside. It's their first time alone since

the night Peter denied Jesus. The burden of Peter's shame has got to hang heavy between them. As they walk Peter waits for the other shoe to drop.

But Jesus wants to know only one thing and so he asks it three times – the same question three times -- once for every time Peter denied him. "Peter," Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Three times he asks it; three times Peter opens his heart and says, "Yes lord, you know that I love you." And there on the shores of despair, Peter is found and brought back into the family of faith.

Do not miss the truth of this text. The question is *not*, "Are you worthy?" It is not, "Are you free of doubt?" It's not even, "Do you promise to never do it again? (that's what I'd ask) But it's simply, "Do you love me?"

The risen Christ comes to Peter not to scold, not to point and condemn, not to confirm Peter's assumptions about how hopeless he was...but to invite him to renew the relationship; to allow him to say I love you for every time he had said, "I don't know him." The Easter miracle is not just that Jesus is risen – it is that lost things can be restored.

This winter I was a part of a backcountry ski patrol search and rescue exercise. It was a practice scenario that had 4 "supposed victims" head out in the late afternoon up into the backcountry towards Castle Peak off Highway 80 just west of Donner Summit. Their task was to go deep into the woods, situate themselves in a remote spot and pretend to be a lost and stranded skier in need of rescue.

Then members of several different backcountry ski patrols gathered in a parking lot just as it was getting dark and we were divided into groups and were given our search grid assignments. With our headlamps turned on we skied out into the backcountry and off trail and began to search the section grids that we were given: our small group of patrollers skiing parallel to one another along the contours of a mountainside, passing between thick stands of pine with the rising full moon overhead and calling out and whistling to try to locate these lost skiers.

After maybe an hour and a half – after we had cleared 2 of our sections – we heard a faint voice in the distance responding to our calls and we stopped to listen. Then we called louder in the direction that we heard the voice and began to move towards where it came from. After a bit of skiing the voice became a little more intelligible and we could begin to shout sentences back and forth as we tried to zero in on where our "lost" skier was. And then as we were getting closer and words were beginning to be heard clearly and understood (but we were still a ways off from the skier) I shouted out, "Stay where you are and we'll come and find you!" "Stay where you are and we'll come and find you!"

You could say it was the beauty of skiing in the snow on a moon-shadowed night. You could say it was the thrill of actually finding one of the victims. But I tell you in truth I had a profound *spiritual* moment out there. Because my words didn't just carry through the trees to the victim; they also resonated deep within my soul and I had this profound moment because there in the dark and the deep snow and the thick trees I understood that *this* is what the gospel calls to *us*! I realized that when we are lost and stranded and feel like we are cut off from help and bereft of hope that it's *then* that God in Christ calls out to us: "Stay where you are and I'll come and find you!" God doesn't say, "Sort yourself out and straighten up your life and show yourself worthy before you can return. God says stay where you are and I'll come and find you! And because of Easter and the resurrection that promise becomes a reality!

Some of us today feel distant—even lost to God. We don't see how God could still love us after all we've done and failed to do. And yet Jesus is here to restore us in love.

Some of us have parts of our lives that are lost to God – hidden in the shadow of shame and protected from his transforming touch. And yet Jesus here to restore us in love.

Some of us have been knocked down by life and we feel lost to ourselves and the world. And yet Jesus is here to restore us in love.

And some of us *do* have a sense of joy about being found by God and restored in love and we rejoice that once we were lost but now we are found. Because Jesus is here to restore us in love.

Friends, where ever you are – whoever you are – whatever you have done or failed to do: look at the face of God in the risen Christ and see there, *for you*, not a frown or a scowl but the smile of one who searches for you to bring you home. This is the good news: when we are most lost, God is most searching for us and God comes to where *we* are to find and restore us – we just need to respond in faith and love. Amen