



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

APRIL 24, 2016
THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

The Possibility Luke 24:36-49; Acts 11:1-18

I don't know about you, but I left here last Sunday after worship with my head spinning! I felt like I had been taken to school. To say the least, Dr. Graham challenged us. Yet, in doing so, he exposed us to an understanding of scripture that spanned all cultures, religions, and time. He reminded us that all scripture is sacred to someone and it might just be worth our while to take the time to figure out why. In so doing, we might even gain a greater appreciation for our own sacred writings.

Granted, it was a lot to take in, but I want you to know that he paid you a high compliment. During lunch Sunday afternoon, someone asked Dr. Graham what a student in his classes might experience during a typical fifty minute lecture, thinking that surely they would get double what we did. His response, however, was surprising. He said quite sincerely, "I would never pack that much into a single lecture!" In other words, Dr. Graham clearly thinks that you are much brighter than his Harvard students. Congratulations!

It was a lot to take in and I know that he was nervous about even being in a preaching slot. His knowledge is vast and he wanted to share the bounty of his studies with us. He was concerned about being accurate with his insights and mindful of how easily his topic could become inflammatory. During the discussions sessions that he offered Sunday night and Monday morning, he demonstrated that he is a gifted scholar. He could have stepped into this pulpit and talked off the cuff for half an hour and we would have learned a great deal.

One of our most "mature" members considered not returning for the evening session. During lunch, her group of friends discussed the pros and cons of the morning experience and she spent the afternoon thinking about whether or not she would come back that evening. She did return, and she told another of our members something that I hope I will never forget. She said she finally decided, "I can choose to go, with the possibility that I might learn one new thing, or I can choose not to go, where there is no possibility of learning anything new." The possibility of learning one new thing. What a wonderful attitude for life!

When you stop to think about it, every day is filled with many possibilities. On a given day, there might be the possibility that it will rain, as it did yesterday, which could lead to the possibility of an afternoon nap or a good book to read. On the other hand, there is the possibility that it will be sunny and warm which can lead to further possibilities like an afternoon walk, a game of golf, a bike ride, or a picnic. There is the possibility that a friend might drop by or a relative might call or you might have dinner out with friends. There is the possibility that something tragic might happen and you could be in the right place at the right time to help someone else. Or you might be the victim and another person takes advantage of the possibility of helping you. There is the possibility that answering a phone call might win you a prize or deliver sad news. There is the possibility that reading the paper will depress you or make you happy. There is the possibility that something will happen to change your life or that nothing will happen to make any difference whatsoever.

The possibility. How many possibilities have we passed up because an opportunity was inconvenient or uninteresting. How many possibilities have gone by the way because we were not available or afraid or unwilling to take a risk? How many times have we let some possibility slip through our fingers?

Simon Peter was a man who knew about possibilities. He strikes me as someone who was usually the one to rush ahead, grab life by the horns, and ride out every opportunity that came his way. Yet, we remember that he did not take seriously the possibility that he might betray Jesus or that Jesus might forgive him. Two weeks ago, we saw how Jesus offered him the possibility of repentance and redemption, not once, but three times.

One thing is for certain, it was always a possibility that Peter was going to get himself into challenging situations. This morning we read his explanation to the leaders of the Jerusalem Church when he was called on the carpet for associating with Gentiles in Caesarea. Peter recounted for his brothers in the faith the vision he had seen of a sheet lowered from heaven with all manner of animals in it and a voice that commanded him to "kill and eat." When he protested that he would do no such thing for no unclean food had ever passed his lips, the voice challenged him to consider the possibility that nothing God created could be unclean!

Peter soon realized the meaning of the odd vision when three men sent by the Gentile centurion Cornelius appeared at his door and asked him to go to Caesarea with them. Thinking there might be the possibility for him to do good there, he went along. He met Cornelius who had assembled family and friends on the possibility that Peter might come. He recounted his own vision

in which an angel had told him that a man named Peter would come and share the Gospel with him. Without hesitation, Peter began to speak and tell the Good News of Jesus Christ. As soon as the words passed his lips, the Holy Spirit fell upon that group of Gentiles just as it had come upon the disciples when they were locked in that upper room in Jerusalem.

It was risky business for Peter because, in general, the early Christians did not think the Gospel was intended for the Gentiles. He took a risk because it was generally forbidden by the Jewish religion to associate with Gentiles and absolutely forbidden to eat certain of their foods. He took a risk because he thought there just might be the possibility that they were wrong and God was right. Aren't we glad that he did?!

Jim Taylor is a Canadian, a retired minister, and a thoughtful Christian. I don't mean that he is thoughtful in the sense of doing kind and generous things for other people, although I suspect he is. He is a thoughtful Christian because he thinks about his faith—all of the time. He writes a couple of articles a week, one of which is called *Soft Edges*. Last week, his *Soft Edges* reflection was about the lake near his house. He noted that over the past few days it had been, in his words, "glassy calm." I read those words and images immediately came to mind of a lake in the early morning and late afternoon hours when there is no wind and the water is perfectly still. Those are such peaceful times. I know why the psalmist chose to extol the virtues of God by saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul" (Psalm 23:1-3). Calm, peaceful waters are soothing to the soul.

They are not, however, necessarily good for the lake. Taylor reminds us that lakes are a vibrant habitat for many species of aquatic life which depend on oxygen in the water to live and thrive. When the water is calm, very little oxygen penetrates the surface of the lake. In winter, when the water cools, the heavier surface water sinks deeper, taking with it life-enriching oxygen. A cold weather lake, he says, "breathes" during the winter months.

At other times, storms cause a lake to breathe. The wind stirs the water, causing waves. Bigger waves cause deeper stirring and more stirring enriches the water with oxygen. If the water is calm, however, fish and other creatures that live deep in the water are deprived of the oxygen they need to thrive. Thinking about his own life and faith, Mr. Taylor writes,

Utterly placid water becomes stagnant.
Rather like us.

I don't want to be stagnant. Like a lake, I welcome the input from the streams and rivers of thought that flow into me. But I have to admit that I'm not keen on having storms in my life. They upset my preconceptions. They force me to adapt. In calm waters, I can feel as if I'm in control; when storms strike, I know I'm not. All I can do is try to keep my head above water.

But I know that glassy calm is not good for me, either.¹

What Jim Taylor and Simon Peter and one of our members who has experienced nine decades of life each knows is that from time to time we need to have the waters of our beliefs whipped up to help us reinvigorate our faith. We need for fresh understanding and challenging ideas to sink deeper into our souls where we are changed for the better. What many of you know is that every day is filled with possibilities and it is up to us to take advantage of them. They may not always be pleasant or easy or even beneficial. We have to judge what is right for us. But if we never stretch ourselves, if we never allow the waters of our lives to churn every once in a while, if we never seek out the oxygen enriching experiences of life that enable our faith to grow and thrive, then our faith will stagnate and perhaps even die.

For me seeing this sanctuary filled last Sunday evening with as many people from the community as from our congregation was deeply gratifying. What was most significant, however, was the fact that a number of people from our local mosque joined us, talked with us, and even brought food to share with us. They felt welcomed. They felt accepted into this community of faith. The possibility that people from throughout this community could come together, exchange ideas, learn from one another, and break bread together was a gift from God. We learned some new things about the Muslim religion and how to think about all religions. One of the significant things I learned is that there is a genuine desire in this community to work together, to bridge divides, to respect differences, and to find common ground for the common good. The new thing I learned is that God is working to bring us together. Who knows what possibilities lie ahead?

God churns the waters of our lives every once in a while through opportunities that hold endless possibilities for us. Let us not miss an opportunity to learn even one new thing. Our life just might be enriched, even changed for the better! And another life might be blessed as well. Just ask Simon Peter, Cornelius, Jim Taylor . . . or the person sitting next to you. Amen.

¹Jim Taylor, "Not Good for Lakes or for Us," *Soft Edges* (April 20, 2016); available online at: <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

April 24, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God who has created us and who continues to sustain us by your loving grace, we come with hearts filled with gratitude for the countless ways that you have blessed us. We thank you for the beauty of your creation. For blooming flowers and budding trees, for the warmth of sunshine and the refreshment of spring rains, for every creature great and small which sings your praise, we offer our thanks to you. We stand in awe as we consider the beauty and wonder and variety of your earth and all that is in it. We also give you thanks for the beauty and variety of people around us. In your loving creativity, you have made each of us unique and uniquely gifted, and yet each of us is created in your image and enlivened with the breath of your Spirit. We are grateful that in your wisdom you have made a world of such diversity and imagination, of such majesty and beauty.

But we confess, O Lord, that sometimes we are frightened by our differences. We confess that we don't always know how to respond to those whose language or customs or opinions or abilities seem so different from our own. And so we build walls to separate ourselves from them and to protect ourselves from the challenges of fostering understanding or risking change. When in our ignorance, fear or apathy we forget that all people are made in your image, help us to tear down the walls that limit our vision and divide our human family. Teach us to build bridges of understanding and compassion. Inspire us to reach out beyond these walls, beyond ourselves, to those in our family and neighborhood, in our city and our world, who are hurting and lonely, who are poor and hungry, who suffer because of violence or injustice or neglect. Make of us a people after your own heart, a people who love the unlovable, who welcome the outcast, who offer healing and hope wherever there is pain and despair. Keep ever before us the example of Christ, who came to love and to serve and to give of himself for the sake of others, and who embodied a vision of a world where justice and peace will reign and all but love will cease. Amen.

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