



“Achieving Success”

Text: John 21:1-19

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

In recent years, there has been a rather large industry of speakers and authors who speak of the Bible as a “manual for success.” Regardless of what sort of ambitious undertaking one might embark on, there are self-ordained “experts” who will direct you to passages of Holy Writ to ensure your success. I am not sure that it was for this purpose that the Bible was written and handed on from generation to generation. I am not familiar with a method of Biblical interpretation that suggests a capitalist approach to life and understanding. Frankly, there are plenty of passages in scripture that might be used to explain alternatives to capitalism – but that is not our purpose this morning.

The Bible isn’t a handbook for success. It isn’t a science book. The Bible isn’t even much of a history book. The Bible is the written record of God’s interaction with two communities of faith: how God related to them, how they related to God, and what happened as a result – good or bad.

There is, however, one unassailable truth before us this morning. I’m not going to give it to you outright, because there wouldn’t be much of a reason for a sermon. I want to build the case and then let you draw the obvious conclusion at the end of the sermon. Frankly, it might take less time than other approaches, so let’s get started.

Last week, I told you that the original ending of John’s gospel was to be found in the last two verses of chapter 20:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (vss 30-31)

The story of Thomas was the original ending of John's gospel. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Lights fade, curtain closes.

But, somewhere along the way, someone wrote an epilogue to the gospel that has become part of the story. At best, we can only surmise that the story was written by members of the community that produced the Gospel of John. It matches in tenor and tone of all that precedes it.

The setting of the epilogue changes. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is centered in Jerusalem. But the epilogue takes us back up north, to the region of Galilee, to the beach of the Sea of Galilee.

And here comes the *déjà vu*.

The disciples have returned to their previous profession. They are out in a boat and fishing. Jesus calls to them. They don't recognize Jesus. Mary Magdalene was at the tomb on Easter morning. She didn't recognize Jesus either, mistaking him for the gardener. Only when Jesus spoke her name did she recognize him. Only when Jesus suggested that they try fishing on the other side of the boat did they begin to recognize him. Remember that.

For a group of fisherfolk, it's amazing that any of them ever ate. No matter where you look in the gospels, the disciples never catch any fish unless Jesus intervenes. No, John doesn't include that story in this gospel. But the story was undoubtedly well-known and often told. The tradition was that the disciples never had anything to show for their efforts without Jesus' guidance. Remember that.

We are back at the same place where Jesus took bread and fish and fed a multitude. It took place right there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had a fire going and roasted the fish and broke the bread and everyone knew right away that it was Jesus. They had seen this before. This was a memory come back to life. Remember that, too.

Then, Jesus takes Peter aside and questions him. "Do you love me more than these?" Three times. Jesus asks three times. Peter answers three times, "yes, Lord. You know that I love you." Peter, who denied Jesus three times, is now asked by Jesus to affirm his love, three times. Remember that.

Four little scenes play themselves out in this epilogue to John's gospel. All of them grounded in stories from the journey with Jesus. All of them, little moments of *déjà vu*. All of them, told to drive the hearer back into their memory and then forward to the present.

And there, for all of us, is a great lesson.

The great temptation - then and now - is to reduce Jesus to a figure of the past. We tend to leave the stories of Jesus and the disciples and the early Christian community in a time long ago in a place far, far away. Somehow or another, we have a remarkable ability to say, "that was then, this is now."

But... "the light shines in the darkness." That's how John begins the gospel. The way of Jesus is as viable today as it was 2,000 years ago. "The light shines in the darkness." Jesus still offers life today and still offers it in abundance. Jesus still brings down the mighty and exalted and raises up the humble and meek.

What the Gospel of John reminds those of us who take the time to read and understand it is simply this: the story of Jesus is not over! If the resurrection of Jesus means anything at all, it means that the ministry and mission of Jesus continues. The light is still shining in the darkness - even in 2016!

And just like those disciples gathered on the shore, Jesus is still feeding, still calling, still empowering and energizing - deniers, and doubters, and discouraged disciples - to continue the work that Jesus was given to do.

A few weeks ago, I watched, once again, one of my favorite movies about D-Day. "The Longest Day" was a 1962 version of the Normandy landing - long before the graphic scenes of "Saving Private Ryan." It was one of those movies that everyone in Hollywood seemingly wanted to be in. So they included just about everyone: Henry Fonda, John Wayne, Richard Burton, Sean Connery, Eddie Albert, Robert Mitchum, Roddy MacDowell, Fabian, Paul Anka, the cast list goes on and on.

There is one scene where Robert Mitchum is commanding his battalion on one of the beaches and they are under heavy fire. He barks at his subordinates, "We gotta get off this beach. We're getting killed here. We gotta get off this beach."

How lovely it might have been for the disciples to simply enjoy the beach that morning with Jesus long ago. How nice it might have been to just hang out, eat some bread, roast some fish, swap stories round the fire about the healings and feedings and everything else they have experienced together.

But the work wasn't on the beach. It was inland, through the hedgerows and across the hills. The work was in dangerous places and in the presence of dangerous people. The work was in places where power held place and where corruption ran rampant.

The work was where the poor huddled in hovels and where the hungry picked through garbage. The work was where the sick could receive care and where some were locked away to be forgotten and put out of mind. The work was where people derided each other, mocked each other, diminished each other. The work was wherever some people were painted as the cause of all the problems of everyone else and then excluded, restrained, and brutalized.

Hey, church! Do you want to achieve success? Do want to do what Jesus called us to do?

“We gotta get off this beach.” The ministry and mission of Jesus needs to move forward. Nothing has changed. No one can rest. The story isn’t over.

The Gospel of John may be coming to a close - the curtain may have come down on John’s narrative - but the real-life drama of Jesus Christ continues. Everything that Jesus did still needs doing. The mission is still alive. The ministry awaits.

And the good news is that Christ is with us. And because of that - we will achieve success after success after success. For now and evermore. Amen.



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