

Step On From Doubt

Sunday 18 April 2021

Reading Acts 3:12-19

¹² When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶ And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

¹⁷ “And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸ In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.

Reading Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

Message A Step On From Doubt

I nearly titled this message, 'Which Peter?' We have seen so many variations on the theme over the last little while.

There has been the visionary Peter – “You are the Christ.”

The mistaken Peter – “Jesus, stop saying these things.”

The boastful Peter – “I will never betray you.”

The audacious Peter – cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant

The cowering Peter – “I am not one of his disciples.”

The distraught Peter – “Then he went out and wept bitterly.”

The confused Peter – “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”

The disbelieving Peter – “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.”

The prophetic Peter – “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

The evangelical Peter – “Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

I don’t know about you, but that seems like quite a list. Peter has truly run the gamut of approaches to Jesus. And I want to say that surely this is a mashup of all the different things people did around Jesus in the weeks leading up to and then following Jesus’ death and resurrection. Until I pause and realise that I think I have been through all of those emotions and reactions myself. Not the cutting off of the ear – although sometimes the way I have spoken to people might make them wish I had cut their ears off – to my regret. And certainly not over such a short time frame. But I am sure that otherwise, all of those Peterisms are things I have done and said in my own way over the years. Then, to my surprise I begin to see that Peter is not so different after all. We might even call him kind of normal – as much as anyone is normal.

Let me put it to you as a series of questions. You may have different answers to me.

Have you ever said that Jesus is the Christ?

Have you ever felt like something Jesus, or God, said or did is wrong?

Have you ever said, out loud or to yourself that you would never betray Jesus?

Have you ever gone and done something clearly stupid in the name of Jesus?

Have you ever denied Jesus – either out loud or by failing to acknowledge him in some way?

Have you ever wept bitterly at your betrayal?

Have you ever been confused about what Jesus rising from the dead really means for you?

Have you found yourself unable to truly believe that Jesus is alive?

Have you ever told someone else about who Jesus is to you?

Have you ever invited someone to get to know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour?

If you can answer yes to just some of those questions, then welcome to the Peter/Petra Fan Club. We're all in this together. Peter, far from being some outlandish outlier is a rather typical human being. With all his doubts and fears and bravado and energy he is just not that different from any of the rest of us. He's probably noisier about it than many of us. But otherwise he represents those same hopes and dreams and fears and doubts that all of us carry.

Let's step into the room with Jesus and the disciples and look at what is going on. They are all inside, with the door closed. Probably talking about what comes next. Will the fishermen go back fishing, the tax collector back to collecting taxes? Will the women sink back into obscurity (more than they are given by their male brethren) and the tradesmen head back to their trades? And how does it feel after all the excitement and hope that had been generated as they lived and worked with Jesus over the last three years. Are they telling stories? Asking what-if questions? Imagining what might have been. There's probably some fear mixed in there – what will happen if the authorities come after Jesus' followers? Anxiety, worry, concern. All mixed with great sadness at the loss of a dear friend and mentor.

Then Jesus suddenly appears among them. What would you think in that moment? How would you react? What would you say or do? This is no small thing. We saw Jesus die. He was definitely buried. Then his body disappeared and we are told that he has risen and there's even a couple of people who claim to have seen him. And then, without coming through the door, there he is, standing right next to us. What am I supposed to think? It's not normal, it's not expected.

It is easy to forget that these are regular people, with no special forces training or in-depth psychological preparation. No amount of Jesus telling them what was going to happen was going to ease them over this hump. So when we read that that they were frightened and doubtful we shouldn't be surprised. In fact we would be surprised if they had any other reaction.

All this comes together to make Peter's speech in our reading truly remarkable. There is no precedent for him to have a forceful, coherent summary of the facts followed by a clear and understandable call to action. Now, here's the thing, I am quite certain that the fear and the doubt were still there to some extent. Later in Acts we see Peter having to be pushed, rather firmly, by the Holy Spirit to step outside of his boundaries. No-one likes getting out of their comfort zone because it is, well, uncomfortable. When Peter stands up to speak to the crowd he is definitely not in his comfort zone. The question then is what has happened? How did this Peter, with all those flaws and mistakes, ever get to the point of being able to speak to people in this way?

Was it because he went to Toastmasters? Did he get some psychological counselling to help iron out his issues? To the best of my knowledge, none of the above. What happened was the Holy Spirit. In the parallel reading from John, Jesus breathes on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' And we read in Acts 2 that all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter writes in 1 Peter 4 that each person receives the gifts as need arises. So, the need arose that someone needed to speak to the onlookers and explain to them what was going on. In this instance it is Peter who stands to speak. And the Holy Spirit enables him to do what probably sat fairly well out of his job description as a fisherman. What we see is a man, transformed from the bumbling buffoon who couldn't put two good ideas together in the same sentence, into a powerful public speaker. Why? Because he allows the Holy Spirit to enable and empower him. He stands up, likely still full of doubt and fear, and says, 'OK, God, here I am, use me.'

Which leads me to ask, 'What about you and me?' Does the Holy Spirit do the same for us? Absolutely! Which begs the question, 'Why don't we see things happen like they did for Peter?' To which the answer may well be, because we don't stand up, full of doubt and fear, and say, 'OK, God, here I am, use me.'

I think that the step on from doubt isn't absence of doubt. It is acting in spite of the doubt. They say that true bravery isn't absence of fear, it is the conquering of fear. I think this is the same. God calls us into uncomfortable, doubt filled places, not so that we can get rid of the doubt, but so we can rise above the doubt and see God through the doubt.

Fellow members of the Peter/Petra Fan Club. I invite you to rise above your doubt and allow God to work in your heart and mind to conquer the doubt and find your calling at work in your lives.

We Pray

Loving God, we so easily pray with the anguished father, 'I believe, help my unbelief.' We acknowledge our fear and our doubt and we ask you to help us to look it in the eye in the same way Peter did, then to step into the call you have on us. It is true that we have often stepped away from your call. We have hidden away from the possible consequences of following you with our whole hearts. Thank you that you continue to love us through all our failings. Grant us strength and courage to serve you with all that we are and everything that you bring to us through your Holy Spirit.

Through the wonderful life of our Lord and Saviour, Amen.