

Follow: 5. Seeing What Cannot Yet be Seen

Acts 10:33-36

June 2, 2019

Pastor Steve Richards

We all follow something or someone. Some people follow in the path that they received from parents and family. Some are influenced by a teacher, an employer or a friend. Some follow a philosophy, like the Golden Rule. Last week I was waiting in line. The person in front of me was reading or watching something on her phone. Usually as people at the front of line are helped, the rest of the line moves forward, but not this woman. She didn't move. She was glued to something on her phone and she had ear buds, listening to something. When it came her turn, the cashier motioned her forward but she didn't notice. The cashier said, mam, it's your turn, but she didn't move, so the cashier motioned for the rest of us to walk around her. And I said to the cashier, "You may need to text her to get her attention." I see a whole lot of people using their phones to find someone or something to follow. We all follow. Even if you are a leader, you still follow something or someone.

I believe life is better when we follow Jesus. I learned this from a disciple name Simon Peter. Review: the first step in following is not ability but availability; true greatness is found in humility of service; when we fail/fall, Jesus does not quit on us but lifts us up with a second chance; and the road from cowardice to courage begins when we make a commitment to something greater than ourselves. This morning, Peter will discover what happens when God leads us to a place outside our comfort zone. The story is found in Acts chapter 10. **There was a man in Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Company.** Cornelius is a Roman officer who commands a battalion of 100 soldiers. We are told he is also a faithful worshipper of God who gives generously and prays constantly to God. One day, Cornelius has a vision in which an angel from God tells him to send men from his home in Caesarea to the city of Joppa in order to locate a man named Peter. In the first message in this series, we learned that the first step in following is availability. Because Cornelius makes himself available to God, he receives this vision from God and even though he does not know where it will lead, he acts on the vision.

And what Peter doesn't know is that a caravan sent by Cornelius is on its way to meet up with him. The next day about noon, Peter goes up on the roof to pray and in the middle of his prayer time, he too has a vision. What Peter sees in his vision is an enormous picnic blanket covered with various kinds of animals. Some of the animals are clean and some unclean – that is, some are kosher and some are not. And Peter hears this voice: **"Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!"** But Peter replies, **"Absolutely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."** According to the religious law that Peter followed, faithfulness to God meant that only animals considered clean and kosher could be eaten. In fact, certain animals had to be kept apart from each other or a clean animal would become unclean. That's the way it worked to show faithfulness to God. It was the way it had always been done. It was the teaching that had been handed down from Moses. To do it any other way, well, it could not be done any other way. Eat only what is clean and kosher. No one would have thought otherwise.

In the middle of this vision, the men sent by Cornelius arrive and ask for Peter. Peter doesn't know they have arrived but in his vision he is told to go with the men who are searching for him. Peter does not understand any of this, but if Peter was anything he was available to be used by God. So when Peter comes down from the roof and sees the men from the vision, he goes with them without hesitation.

When they reach the home of Cornelius, Cornelius falls at the feet of Peter. Do you get the picture? Peter, a follower of Jesus, a faithful Jew all of his life is now in Caesarea. And Caesarea is not in Jewish territory. Already Peter is outside his comfort zone. He is standing before Cornelius, a Roman citizen, a Gentile. Cornelius might believe in God. He might do good works and say prayers, but he is not a Jew. He is not a true believer! Of utmost concern to Peter is faithfulness to God and associating with a Gentile, a non-Jew is definitely not being faithful to God. Suddenly, Peter is way outside his comfort zone. He is in a place he does not want to be, a place he and everyone else knows he is not supposed to be. Once again Peter is confused. He doesn't understand what is happening, and he asks, "Why am I here?" Well, Cornelius doesn't know either. He had this vision and an angel of God told him to find Peter and now that Peter is present, this must be some kind of answer to prayer and so Cornelius says, "Peter, this is a God-thing. God has heard my prayers and told me to send for you and now that you are here, I'm ready to listen to you." "Listen to me? I shouldn't even be here. I don't even want to be here!" But at that moment, Peter suddenly makes a connection. His head and heart connect with God, and Peter "gets it." The vision with the blanket filled with clean and unclean together, traveling with the caravan and Peter, the Jew, one who is clean, in the presence of Cornelius, Gentile, one who is unclean. What Peter saw and did not understand, is now absolutely clear, and Peter says, **"I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another."** God is the God of Jew and Gentile. God is the God of believer and non-believer.

Peter had been called to think outside the box. And unbeknownst to Peter, God was already outside the box. Here's what we learn when we follow Jesus: seeing what cannot yet be seen – the ability to envision what's outside conventional thinking – because God's already there. God's purpose could not be realized unless and until Peter changed his way of thinking. And what Peter didn't know was that conventional thought and practice was a barrier to God's purpose. Peter was a barrier to God's purpose. But God was already on the other side of that barrier calling Peter to come on over.

Linda was sick with the flu and felt terrible, but she was on a plane coming home to Juneau, Alaska from Seattle. Her husband and their six and nine year old girls were waiting for her. It's bad enough having to fly when you feel sick, but her flight made two stops along the way. Besides that, the plane was full and the only seat she could get was a middle seat between two men. They introduced themselves as Jim and Tom. Somewhere along the way, somewhere between stops, somewhere between bouts of nausea, Linda learned that both Jim and Tom had AIDS. She told them about her church in Juneau and asked them about theirs. They didn't have one. Jim had never been in church. Although Tom was raised in a Christian family, his family disowned him when he contracted AIDS.

Linda invited Jim and Tom to her church. They lived ten miles from the church and didn't have a car. Never mind. Linda and her husband Steve picked them up Sunday after Sunday – and Jim and Tom were welcomed by the congregation. They shared freely about their medical condition. Within a couple of weeks, they asked to be baptized and became members of the church. Transported by Linda and Steve, they came to worship regularly. Within a year, Jim died, and in another six months Tom was dead. As both of them said many times, in this congregation they felt they had "come home." All because a woman sick on an airplane didn't hesitate to move outside the box and a congregation moved outside the box.

My favorite Robin Williams movie is *Dead Poets Society*. Robin Williams plays an English teacher at a boy's school, trying to teach poetry to a class that isn't interested. In this scene, he has his students come up to his desk one by one and stand on it. [*scene from the movie*] With a

slight change in their perspective, they begin to see what they had never noticed before. Peter was able to see what could not yet be seen – when he made himself available to God, when he took time to listen, and even when his first instinct was to say no – do not go there, he was willing to look outside the box.

I remember one of Gary Larson's Farside cartoons in which there is a group of Canadian geese in a "v" formation, walking along the ground heading south. Suddenly, the lead goose looks up to see another "v" formation passing them in the sky and says, "Now there's a good idea!"

Where is God today but we are not? Is there something within us that keeps us from seeing God where we are not willing to go?

Sometimes we live our lives thinking faithfulness to God means living inside a box. When Jesus called Peter to fish, not for fish but people – Peter knew what those people looked like – they looked Jewish. That was the box. Let's learn what Peter would learn: follow Jesus and he will help you see what cannot yet be seen. Could God be leading you to a place you don't want to go? Peter was led outside the box because God was already there.

Grow, Pray, study for Week of June 2, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Merciful Savior, like Peter, we need a renewed understanding and experience of your love. We know that you love unconditionally, and we are eager to receive that gift of love ourselves. Yet we confess that we can be stingy with your gracious gift when it comes to others, especially others who are unlike us. Come, Holy Spirit, come, to cleanse and change us from the inside out. For the sake of Christ we pray. Amen.

Monday, June 3

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. They didn't know what to make of this. Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn't here, but has been raised. Remember what he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Human One must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words. When they returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn't believe the women. But Peter ran to the tomb. When he bent over to look inside, he saw only the linen cloth. Then he returned home, wondering what had happened.

Observation: The gospels forthrightly reported that none of the disciples, including Peter, were waiting eagerly for Jesus to rise from the dead. Even when "the women" reported that two men in gleaming clothing had asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" their report "struck the apostles as nonsense." Peter saw the empty tomb, but only wondered what had happened.

Application: When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the man had "his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Untie him'" (John 11:44).

When Peter peered into Jesus' empty tomb, "he saw only the linen cloth." No one had to untie the risen Jesus. Some suggest this was a sign that Jesus had risen right out of the cloth and wrappings. Jesus' resurrection changed everything for Peter. What effect has it had on you?

Prayer: Loving Lord, when Peter first found the tomb empty, what had happened there went stunningly beyond his imagination. Open my heart and mind to trust in the unimaginably good news of the empty tomb. Amen.

Tuesday, June 4

Scripture: Mark 16:1-7

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you."

Observation: It seems likely that as Jesus' enemies condemned and crucified him, Peter thought his denial of Jesus would haunt him the rest of his life. Thankfully, unlike Judas (Matthew 27:3-5), he did not succumb irreversibly to despair. But Mark's story (and John 21:3, which we'll read tomorrow) do strongly suggest that Peter wasn't sure that he would ever be welcome as one of Jesus' disciples after his triple denial of his master.

Application: In Mark 16:7, the messenger told Mary Magdalene and the other women, "Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee." Peter three times had made a point of publicly denying that he even knew Jesus. Yet Jesus made sure his name was specifically included in the invitation to his disciples. What does this tell you about Jesus' grace toward Peter? Can you trust Jesus to treat you the same way when you fail?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, lest Peter let shame exclude him from your company, you invited him by name. Thank you for offering the same kind of personal, "nothing is too bad to forgive" grace to me. Amen.

Wednesday, June 5

Scripture: John 21:1-7

Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two other disciples were together. Simon Peter told them, "I'm going fishing." They said, "We'll go with you." They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't realize it was Jesus. Jesus called to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." He said, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water.

Observation: John 21 told about Peter and six other disciples back at the Sea of Galilee. (John did not explain why they chose to go fishing.) Despite their past fishing experience, they were not successful on their own. (Perhaps they were rusty after following Jesus for three years?) Yet when Jesus guided them, they hauled in a huge catch.

Application: This story (like the one in Luke 5:1-10) told of Jesus showing experienced fishermen like Peter where to find a startlingly large catch. When have you found yourself ineffective (in your personal life or an area of ministry) because you weren't open to Jesus' wisdom? When has "practicing the presence of Jesus" made your efforts clearly more effective?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you promised to be with me "every day until the end of this present age" (Matthew 28:20). Help me keep my heart open, attuned to your comforting, guiding presence. Amen.

Thursday, June 6

Scripture: John 21:8-14

The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they weren't far from shore, only about one hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you've just caught." Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn't torn, even with so many fish. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Observation: John, a master of evocative images, must have meant in part for this scene of Jesus building a fire to remind readers that Peter's faith "crashed" around a fire in Caiaphas' court (John 18:15-18, 25-27). It also showed that Jesus was no ghost—he was truly, physically alive. He built a fire and cooked breakfast! (See also Luke 24:36-43)

Application: The fish and bread were ready, yet Jesus said, "Bring some of the fish you've just caught." Why doesn't Jesus just do everything for us, changing us into the people he wants us to be, but instead he asks us to join our effort with his spiritual power? In what ways does his call for you to work with him to grow spiritually offer the best path to character development, so that you are still "you," but a new you?

Prayer: Loving Lord, long before you prepared this meal, the psalmist wrote, "You set a table for me" (Psalm 23:5). As I eat my meals today, remind me of the deeper ways you feed my soul as well as my body. Amen.

Friday, June 7

Scripture: John 21:15-19

When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asked a second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep." He asked a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" He replied, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. I assure you that when you were younger you tied your own belt and walked

around wherever you wanted. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will tie your belt and lead you where you don't want to go." He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me."

Observation: Three times Peter denied knowing Jesus. His heart must have been aching, eager to reconnect. Jesus, a master psychologist, didn't want that failure to haunt Peter forever. Three times, he allowed Peter to affirm his love, deeper and more solid because Jesus forgave him after he failed. Then Jesus told him that he would yet have the chance to live out his pledge in John 13:37 ("I'll give up my life for you"). With the cost of following clearly in view, Jesus repeated the same simple, sweeping call: "Follow me."

Application: The three questions correspond to Peter's three denials. Three for completeness, yes, but three also for reminder. The smell of the charcoal fire lingers. Peter's night of agony—and Jesus' own night of agony—returns. But because of the latter, the former can be dealt with. What failures might haunt your relationship with Jesus? Imagine yourself on that beach with him, by that fire. Hear Jesus ask you, "_____, do you love me?" Answer, three times, and hear Jesus deal with any barriers that separate you.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I pray these words of John Wesley: "Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee." Please help me to mean them. Amen.

Saturday, June 8

Scripture: Acts 2:1-24, 37-41

When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!" They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!" Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams. Even upon my servants, men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a cloud of smoke. The sun will be changed into darkness, and the moon will be changed into blood, before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. "Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among you. You yourselves know this. In accordance with God's

established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. God raised him up! God freed him from death's dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him.

When the crowd heard this, they were deeply troubled. They said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter replied, "Change your hearts and lives. Each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away—as many as the Lord our God invites." With many other words he testified to them and encouraged them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day.

Observation: Did Jesus' restoration of Peter make a difference? Oh, yes! Pentecost was the Hebrew harvest festival, and came 50 days after Passover. On this day of Pentecost, just 50 days after the Passover when Jesus died on the cross, God sent the Holy Spirit in a powerful way. Some skeptics claimed the Spirit-filled Christians must have started drinking early. Peter, who just 50 days earlier had feared to call Jesus his Lord even to a servant girl, now forcefully told them this wasn't inebriation. It was God pouring out the Spirit, as promised in Joel 2:28. The Spirit used Peter's bold preaching of Jesus as Savior to touch so many hearts that it changed the disciples from a tiny, almost irrelevant group to a movement of thousands.

Application: Peter quoted some scary-sounding images from Joel: "wonders in the heavens," "blood and fire and smoke." He ended the quotation at the key point: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How can that message make earth's problems less scary to you? Peter said, "This Jesus, God raised up. We are all witnesses to that fact" (verse 32). The Jerusalem authorities and Roman rulers hated that message. They might have easily proved Peter and the early Christians wrong by just producing Jesus' dead body. But Peter knew they couldn't do that, because it wasn't there. How does "this Jesus, God raised up" provide hope to your outlook on life and death?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, through the Spirit's power, the same Peter who denied even knowing you at Passover boldly preached your victory 50 days later at Pentecost. Send your power into my life, stirring me to live boldly for you. Amen.