

GETTING STUCK

It is 3:15 on Thursday afternoon, and I'm running out of time. I have Maundy Thursday services tonight, and in less than 24 hours I will be standing in the pulpit at Christ and Holy Trinity. As the third speaker in a rotation of seven I will be expected to say something cogent about the story of Peter. I'll be expected to recount in one way or another this familiar tale of how the chief of the apostles followed Jesus after he was arrested into the courtyard of the high priest. No doubt, I'll be counted on to speak of how he had great courage at first, but then, in the end, chickened out. I'll be expected to draw some conclusion or another—probably applying the truth of the text to our own time and place.

That's what will be expected of me, but it's just not working out that way. I've started to write a couple of times, and it just doesn't feel right. I've thought of describing the scene in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, where Peter yells out, and "I don't know the man!" I've looked at the last chapters of Orwell's 1984, and considered comparing Peter's dilemma to Winton's as he is interrogated by O'Brien and tempted to give up his lover Julie. I've thought of giving a narrative recounting of Peter's story. It's a long and wonderful one, that is a joy to tell as it wends its way through Easter and Pentecost and the years of the early church.

I've thought of all those things—but none of them seem to fill the bill this year. None of them work.

I'm stuck. Call it what you will: writer's block—Holy Week overload—brain freeze. Doesn't really matter. Whatever you call it, I'm still stuck.

I have a certain image of myself as a preacher. I like to be thought of as witty, intelligent, and certainly relevant.

But this afternoon I don't feel like any of that. How can you be witty on Good Friday? It's not exactly a day to leave them rolling in the aisles! And intelligent? Well, if I were smarter I could figure this out—now couldn't I? And relevant? I feel about as relevant as the Easter Bunny in August.

So I'm stuck.

But now that I think about it, maybe that's the place to start. Maybe that's just how Peter felt.

I mean, he also seems to have had a definite image of himself as well. He was brave and loyal, the ultimate disciple, the truest of true followers. When Jesus had asked who the people thought he was, it was Peter who'd identified him as the Messiah. And earlier that very night, when Jesus had wanted to wash his feet, Peter had refused at first; after all, he

should be washing Jesus' feet. And when they'd come to arrest Jesus, it was Peter who'd tried to defend him. Peter who'd cut off the High Priest's servant's ear.

Yes Peter, like me, or perhaps I like Peter, had a strong sense of his own identity, a self-image closely nurtured and protected.

And for all that, there he was cowering in the dark. Where was his courage? Where was his loyalty? What kind of follower was he proving to be each time he denied that he knew Jesus?

He was stuck. Just like me.

But in the end he still managed to find his way out of his dilemma, maybe not that night, but in time. All because of grace. In the end he recognized his own failures. In the end he acknowledged that his self-image didn't always hold up—that while he was by-and-large a true follower, a loyal friend and a brave human being, sometimes he wasn't.

Sometimes he just got stuck.

Sometimes he failed miserably. And then he needed forgiveness. Then he needed to draw on a strength greater than his own. Then he needed to reconnect with the reality that even if you're the confidante of Christ himself, sometimes your own limitations get the best of you.

And then, having come clean, just maybe, you can get unstuck.

After the Resurrection, Peter escapes to go fishing in Galilee. But then, to his surprise, he has an encounter with the resurrected Jesus. And he is forgiven by him right there on the beach at breakfast. "Peter," asks Jesus, "do you love me?" Three times. Three times Peter says yes. And each time he is given a charge: feed my sheep—my lambs—my sheep.

After that, Peter is able to move on. He is unstuck. Eventually he moves so fully into his identity as an apostle, that history has treated him as the most revered of the disciples—no longer stuck, but rather, freed from his self-image, by living into the image of Christ. He was even crucified.

I don't know what the Episcopalians and their guests down at Christ and Holy Trinity will think about these musings, but maybe sharing them tomorrow makes some sense. I hope I don't embarrass my friends John Branson and Andrea Martin by doing so, but in writing about Peter, in considering his faith journey, I've managed to move on myself. I've managed to move past my block. I'm unstuck. And while these words may not be especially witty, or even very scholarly, I do think they may prove to be relevant.

For there are times when we all, like Peter, get stuck—even at times, on ourselves.

But like Peter we can find the grace, the forgiveness, the help we need to move on.

To get unstuck.

Which I suppose is one way to define salvation.

Maybe tomorrow I'll just share these thoughts, say amen, and sit down.

--John H. Danner