

WGUMC April 10, 2016
John 21:1-19

"Falling Upward"

I listened to Richard Rohr's book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* while driving to and from the redwoods each week last summer. But I saved it until now because I think Rohr has an especially appropriate message for the Easter season.

When you think about it, resurrection is a kind of falling upward that doesn't just happen to Jesus. He only sets the pattern for us. His descent into human life is followed by his ascent to the right hand of God. So in his life, death and resurrection, Jesus embodies a pattern of falling and rising, living and dying, that seems to be the M.O. of the Universe. Rohr calls it "one huge pattern of entropy [if you want to get science-y about it]: constant loss and renewal, death and transformation, the changing of forms and forces." [p.xxv] It's what everything in the universe does, from stars to souls. We

are made of star-dust and Spirit-breath, so Rohr's book about falling upward is for us, too.

In the next several sermons I will be trying to bring the words of Richard Rohr to the words of Scripture in the hope that we can glean some wisdom for our lives. We start today with another one of Jesus' resurrection appearances in the Gospel of John.

Our text begins, "After these things." In other words, after Jesus has showed himself to Mary at the tomb and to the Disciples in the upper room and then later to Thomas, the scene shifts from Jerusalem way up to the Sea of Galilee. It's as if the disciples watched the preview and then decided to leave the Easter show. They don't seem to know what else to do, so they go home and try to go back to their old life. They get back in their old boats and try their hand at their old trade. But it doesn't work. They fish all night and catch nothing.

I wonder if they are thinking about when they met Jesus on that same beach—it seems like a long time ago now—and he told them that he would make them fishers of men and women and they left their nets to follow him. The Holy Spirit must have been working pretty hard that day because they willingly left, not only their nets, but also their livelihood, their family, their security, and their home.

We think of this as a huge sacrifice only required of extra special people, but the truth is that we all need to leave home. We just don't want to do it. Rohr says that "the familiar and the habitual are so falsely reassuring, and most of us make our homes there permanently. The new is always by definition unfamiliar and untested, so God, life, destiny, suffering have to give us a push—usually a big one—or we will not go. Someone has to make clear to us that homes are not meant to be lived in—but only to be moved out from." [*Introduction*, p. xvii]

By home Rohr means what you make in the first half of life, but it is what you have to leave in order to get to the second half. Each half of life comes with its own task. In the first half, our task is to build a strong container, a stable identity for ourselves.

Peter, in the first half of his life, labored to create an identity for himself. He learned how to fish. He got married and established a home for himself and his family. Undoubtedly, he worked hard to attain a certain position in his community. He earned a certain reputation and guarded it jealously. These are all necessary tasks of the first half of life. We have to make the container before we can fill it. And we have to gain a strong sense of self before we are confident enough to give it away.

Many of us spend our entire lives just trying to accomplish the tasks of the first half of life. The demands of acquiring a career, a home, a family, some sense of self-worth and security consume us and fool us into thinking that this is what life is: a

survival dance. But Rohr says that building the container is just the first part of life. In the second half of life, we have to figure out what that container is supposed to hold and how to let God fill it. [p. xiii] So the first half is just the platform. When we have finished all these survival tasks, we will have just gotten to the starting gate of life.

And all too many never get that far. Sadly, we all know people who never had a stable identity to begin with. For whatever reason—bad parenting or bad luck, poor choices or poor health—they never built that strong container that they could later fill with abundant life.

I sometimes think of the things I wish I could redo as a pastor. When I arrived in my first appointment at the ripe old age of 24, I already had a wedding scheduled for me. This was rural Idaho and the couple was marrying far too young. Even though I didn't know much of anything, I knew something was wrong when neither the bride nor groom-to-be could talk about

anything real with me. To make matters worse, at the rehearsal, the bride's father made a pass at me and laughed about it. A few years later, his picture was in the paper. He'd been arrested for molesting the bride's younger sister.

I wish I could have done something more to help those young people. Given their resources, I wondered what kind of married life they could possibly have. But the truth is that no life is without huge challenges. Very few successfully navigate the first half of life without falling many times and without failing big time.

So why does Peter go back to Galilee? After all, he has seen Jesus resurrected. Jesus brought him to the very starting gate of his new life. Why does he want to go back to his old one?

Maybe it was because Peter knows that he failed at following Jesus. In the end, when it really mattered, Peter denied him not once, but three times. And maybe he thinks

that by failing Jesus, he has disqualified himself from the real life that Jesus was trying to give him, so he tucks his tail between his legs and goes back home.

How many of us get up to the starting gate and refuse to open it? Refuse to enter upon the second half of our lives because we think we haven't done a good enough job yet on the first half? Don't let your need for perfection impede your progress. Richard Rohr talks about the need to fail. Adam and Eve had to eat the apple and leave the garden in order to become human. Otherwise, they wouldn't have needed Jesus to come and save them. Julian of Norwich puts it this way: "First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God!" [p. 58]

In that line of thinking, Peter had to deny Jesus, and the other disciples had to flee. Somehow, they had to bring to an end the first half of their life, their dependence on the earthly Jesus, or they would never be able to live the second half and

follow the risen Christ. In the first-half of life, Jesus took care of them; now he challenges them. The Jesus who said "come," now tells his disciples to "go."

So on this pivotal day, Jesus helps the disciples take in a huge haul of fish, not because he wants them to be successful fishermen, but because he wants to know if Peter loves him more than he loves fish: "Do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Then don't try to go back to the first half of your life because that isn't your real life, Peter. Don't fish. Instead, "Feed my lambs."

Now Jesus isn't talking about giving up fishing for farming, but he gives Peter a new job. He has completed his first task: he knows how to fish. But now that he has the boat, the container, so to speak, the second task is figuring out what to fill it with. And Jesus says, not with fish, but with my followers. "Tend my sheep."

Jesus marks the transition between the first and second half of life when he says to Peter, "When you were young [in the first half of life], you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished." Not so in the second half. "Someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." Now the text says that this was to indicate what kind of death Peter would die. But you could also say that Jesus is fastening a belt around Peter to indicate what kind of life Peter will get to live by going where Jesus wants him to go. Remember, Jesus said, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." [Matthew 16:18] From here on, in the second half of his life, Peter's nets will always be full to overflowing.

You don't have to be Peter to feel as if you've been fishing all night and catching nothing, so aren't you just a little curious about this guy standing on the beach. Don't you

wonder what he has in store for you in the second half of your life? The events of Easter morning bring us to the very starting gate of real life. What is keeping us from lifting the latch? Like Peter, we have to choose. We can die still doing the survival dance or we can live to do the sacred dance.

You'll tell me, "But I'm too busy with the first half of life to even think about the second half." Perhaps. But being busy is not an excuse; it's a choice. As Parker Palmer says, "Am I busy? Of course I am. Am I too busy to live my own life? Only if I value it so little that I am willing to surrender it to the enemy." [Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*] I say, let's surrender it to God and see what happens.

In a couple of weeks, we'll go with Paul on a further journey to see what happens.