

Abandon Your Small Boats
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The United Church of Gainesville
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Scripture – Mark 1:16-20 - As Jesus passed along the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending their nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

And from the oldest ending of Mark, the oldest gospel, this Easter call:

Mark 16:1-8 - When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

SERMON

Sandy – There are two things we can count on at Easter. One is that, whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey, Easter will be a good day at church. Brass, choirs, beautiful banners and flowers, great singing, people looking better than average (even here at UCG), all surround us like a carousel of treasured memories and shining hope.

The other thing we can count on is that there is a back story to all this good news and celebration. Easter doesn’t just happen out of nowhere. We preachers like to talk about how Easter rose out of the events of Palm Sunday, the Thursday night of betrayal, the Friday of crucifixion, and the emptiness of Saturday. And it did, but Easter also started much further back than that. The seeds of the Easter story were planted in a pilgrimage, longer even than the season of Lent, a journey from the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. So we’re going back to the beginning in order to understand the ending.

Larry – And we’re going to the oldest gospel, Mark, probably written some time around 70 CE. Mark’s gospel has no Christmas story; instead Mark introduces Jesus as an adult, saying, “*Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John the Baptist.*” Mark then tells us, without any details, that Jesus goes to the wilderness for forty days to fast and pray, returning from the

desert to discover that John is in prison. *This all happens in the first fourteen verses of the first chapter of Mark.*

Jesus then begins his public ministry, preaching the Good News from God: that the Kingdom of God is near. As Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee, he spots two men, brothers actually, named Simon and Andrew. They are doing what folks do for a living. They are fishing. Jesus calls them to leave their boats and nets and to come with him on a journey of faith, a journey of teaching and of healing. Simon and Andrew leave their boats and follow, as do James and John and then others whom Jesus calls.

In Chapter 15, Mark tells us that women were called too, women who followed Jesus, providing for him when he was in Galilee. *“Come,” says Jesus, “Come with me. Leave your boats. Leave your small boats and follow me.”*

Sandy - This Bible story is told in beautiful and compelling words, in one of my favorite hymns:

*You have come down to the lake shore,
seeking neither the wise nor the wealthy,
but only asking for me to follow.
O Jesus, you have looked into my eyes;
kindly smiling you've called out my name.
On the sand I have abandoned my small boat;
Now with you I will seek other seas.
("You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore", Cesareo Gabarain,
New Century Hymnal)*

This hymn translates Mark's scripture into a call that feels immediate, personal, and contemporary. The small boat is any contained space, any narrow state of mind, any situation that prevents us from following that call of God to be our fullest, truest selves, seeking other seas of growth and service.

Larry - The lakeshore is what is known as a liminal place, a threshold where we move from one part of life into another. Often at liminal places, there are boundaries that seem to be uncrossable or barriers that seem unbreakable. These liminal places are often sacred sites.

Sandy - It is there, at those liminal places of both sacred beauty and difficult barriers, where Jesus calls, *“Abandon your small boat and follow me.”* If there is anything that Jesus was about, it was just this: reminding us to let go of what is small and petty and confining, what is rigid and unjust and static, to let go of all that and grow into something new and open, something expanding and compassionate, something unexpected and miraculous.

Larry - This is more than a life transition. It is a call to a faith journey, a call where we most often need the personal presence or personification of the holy. In the Bible story today, the call of God is embodied in Jesus. The need for a personal call is why so many religions of the world have personal mediators for God, like Buddha, Shiva, a particular spiritual guide. There are times when the image of God as an all encompassing ground of being is not as compelling as a personal sense of God who speaks to us and calls us. And this call may come

through someone who challenges us to leave our small boats and seek other shores.

Sandy - Think of Moses, in the desert, on the run because he has killed one of Pharaoh's servants. God speaks to Moses through a burning bush, calling Moses to leave his small boat as a Hebrew with privileges in Pharaoh's court so that Moses can instead lead his people out of slavery, over the threshold into freedom.

Larry - Isaiah went to the temple the day his good friend, the kind and just King Uzziah died. In the temple darkness, Isaiah heard a voice say, "*Who will go for me? Whom shall I send?*" and Isaiah replied, "*Here am I Lord, send me.*" And while Isaiah goes on to write some of the most beautiful words of comfort in the bible, he also becomes a prophet who shouts God's challenge to Israel: "*Ah sinful nation, people laden with iniquity... who have forsaken the Lord... I cannot endure your solemn assemblies and your iniquity... I will hide my eyes from you ... your hands are full of blood. But cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, and rescue the oppressed.*" That's how prophets speak, in case you were wondering. And this is why people don't often invite prophets home to dinner - a second time. But I digress.

Gautama was a rich young man, stuck in the small boat of his privilege. Venturing outside the protection of his father's palaces, he saw the pain of the world and began traveling the countryside seeking a way to understand and transform this pain. One day, under the Bo tree, he saw a path to enlightenment and became known as the Buddha, which means "*one who is awake.*" Buddha called others to leave their small boats.

Sandy - St. Columba, in sixth century Ireland, killed a man and fled. He stopped at the first island from which he could no longer see Ireland. This island, Iona, has, for centuries, been considered a liminal place where the veil between heaven and earth is wafer thin. Columba founded a sacred community on Iona. Some of those Celtic Christians who followed Columba were so infused with the call to seek other shores that they set sail in boats without rudders, allowing the winds of the Holy Spirit to direct them.

The Lakota Sioux peoples had an ancient saying that a woman shall not walk in front of a man. But White Buffalo woman appeared from the wilderness and gave her people new ways to worship and to follow the Great Spirit. She became their spiritual leader, calling them to new horizons.

Larry - The call of God comes to and through holy figures, like Jesus or Buddha or White Buffalo Woman, who speak to us and call us out of our small boats into a new and wider faith and future.

Sometimes it comes through a phone call. To come to Gainesville was certainly a call to me to leave my small boat of New England. That call came through a phone call from Catherine Berg, speaking for the UCG search committee. I had planned to spend my life in that region where the United Church of Christ was the largest Protestant denomination with the most beautiful white colonial churches on picturesque town greens that were

familiar to me, a land where roaches were tiny little things that you could get rid of with an occasional can of Raid. Instead God called me to come to this church that had no building, where our denomination was listed as “other” in the religious preference desk at the hospital, and the roaches seemed big enough to carry off small pets.

Once I came to Gainesville, similar calls kept coming. Susan Cary called me twenty seven years ago and asked me to visit a young man on death row, Ray Meeks. Twelve years ago David Pittman, the rector of Holy Trinity Church called and asked that this church house homeless families through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Calls come at 4:00 a.m. or noon, or midnight that there has been a terrible death, and I leave my small comfortable boat to be there. After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, there was a clear call we were to go and work there, and many of us did.

Today I listen for a call of personal transformation: how to be faithful to my commitments to peace and justice in ways that don't rehash the 60's; how to serve others while at the same time tending to my family, friends, and co workers with the same compassion I ask others to give the wider world. Today I am trying to follow the call of God to transform me into someone who can listen as eloquently as I speak.

Sandy – Sometimes the call comes internally, within us. The call of faith to find a path of meaning and service has been part of my life since I was in high school. I've sailed and then grown beyond a lot of small boats. That's been true of my faith, that's been true of my personal identity, that's been true of my vocation. And I think it's really important to remember that our spiritual call is not necessarily the same thing as our profession. It's easy to forget that when you are a minister. One of the gifts of my long and circuitous route to ministry is that I didn't begin as an ordained minister. I had to discern who I was as a woman, a mother, a wife, a friend, long before I had a ministerial identity. I see my call as finding my own sense of God, my voice and my strengths, as I experienced many ways of service and helping others.

The call I am following now is a call to risk “rocking the boat” of the comfortable place I have found here at UCG. The United Church of Christ has opened the possibility of an alternative route to ministerial ordination for people like me who do not have a seminary degree. So I've written the three papers, collected the references, and put together my resume, all of which I will submit within the next month to the Committee on Church and Ministry. I am a test case – and for someone like me, this is like setting out on a small wooden raft in uncharted waters. What I realize today is that the result is not nearly as important to me as the fact that, because of all the small boats I have learned from and left behind, I am now able to take this step, following a path where my whole life has led me.

And what about the call to our church? As inclusive and open as we are here at UCG in our faith, as active and committed to compassion and justice as we are, we too need to listen for that voice calling to us, reminding us that God is still and always larger than our current perceptions, and also larger than our all-too-familiar comfortable questions about faith. We are called to remember,

as a congregation, that God is still speaking, still calling us to seek new seas of faith and action, to leave behind a boat labeled “small” and find our new journey together.

Larry - Today, I believe that we as citizens of a prosperous and free nation are called by God to recognize that there are better ways to solve the conflicts of nations, races, and clans than the prisons we have built and the wars we have fought. I believe that we as citizens and as a nation are being called by God to recognize that the earth, our planet, is in great peril and to join with other faiths, other people, and other nations that are committed to healing the earth.

Sandy - We say all this on Easter because, to understand the ending, we need to remember the beginning, which is a call from Jesus to follow. As we have shared some of the places in our lives where we’ve heard that call to leave our small boats, we invite you, as part of your celebration of Easter resurrection, to listen for the ways God calls you by name to a larger vision of your faith, to an expanding vision of who you are and what your life is to be about, and how you are to be of service to the world and to its people.

Larry - I believe that each of us is called again to the lakeshore of our lives, that liminal place where the next boundary seems to be uncrossable, the next barrier unbreakable. And on Easter more than any other time, we are called to remember that no matter what name we use for the power of the holy, God is always on the other side of whatever unbreakable barrier, whatever uncrossable boundary holds us firmly in yesterday’s grip.

Deep within this call is also the promise, that the final border, the one most frightening to us all, the border of death, is to be crossed just like all the others, with a wistfulness for what we leave behind and a promise of what lies ahead. And that is Easter’s blessing – and the promise of resurrection.

PRAYER - O Jesus, I have known you in many ways in my life – in the simple songs and stories of my childhood, in your teachings that called me to follow your way, in your healing compassion that is a guiding light for my faith, in your consistent witness for justice, and mercy and peace.

Today, you come to me again, Jesus, as luminous as the full moon of spring, soaring like the sounds of the trumpet, sailing on the winds of heaven, and calling me to walk with you, past all the dead ends of my life into the promise of resurrection.

Open my heart and break open my own tombs of fear; let me hear my own name, let me glimpse my own vision of who I am called to be.

I pray for those I hold dear, whom I name in silence now – and for the saints of my life, those who have died, those angels who cheer for me and send their love to me.

I pray for all who are surrounded this day by violence and hatred and war, that there may be a resurrection of peace in our world that is increasingly smaller and more fragile.

Be for me, O God, be for all people, the One who rolls away stones and beckons us to walk into the Easter light of new life and unending grace. Amen.