

# Stewardship Sermon Starters

## April, 2013

Prepared by the Rev. Libby Howe, LaCrosse Area Synod, LaCrosse, Wis.

### April 7, 2013

**John 20:19-31**

During this month we walk in the resurrection mystery and promise. I'm reminded of the first verse from 1 Corinthians 4; Paul writes, "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." So how do we see Jesus stewarding the mystery of resurrection in this Gospel text today? To steward means to manage, care for, live in. It is significant that the first thing the resurrected Jesus says is "Peace be with you." He doesn't have to say that! So many other things come to mind that make more worldly sense. He might have said "Where did you all go when I was dying?" or "Did you see what I just did? Just busted right through that wall! Pretty neat, huh?" or "I told you so!" The disciples saw Jesus and were afraid. Why wouldn't they be? Dead people usually stay dead. And friends we've betrayed and doubted and deserted have every justification to be vengeful and angry. But Jesus says, "Peace be with you." How is the mystery of the resurrection stewarded? By bringing a blessing of peace to fearful people. Upon receiving the blessing, the disciples become part of the resurrection event and participants in the mystery. As witnesses and participants, they become stewards. Jesus breathes upon them the Holy Spirit and commands them to forgive sins. People who live in a resurrected life are people who, filled with the Holy Spirit, forgive sins. It is not an option to hold the grudge, be ungracious, work out vendettas. Stewarding resurrection and forgiving others are one in the same. Simply put, forgiveness for another person is the act of welcoming the possibility of new life in them; new behavior, new attitudes, new identities. Forgiveness opens the door to a new future; one not stuck in the guilt or regret of past mistakes and poor choices.

### April 14, 2013

**Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)**

**Psalm 30 (11)**

**John 21:1-19**

In this week's texts we see how Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Ananias and the psalmist are stewarding the mystery of the resurrection. The emerging theme is one of openness to impossibilities. Resurrection demands we become open, perhaps even expectant, of things that no one sees coming. Its very nature is by all natural laws and rational understandings impossible. When dead no longer means dead, everything we think about what is real or not, what is right or not becomes open to question.

Here are the ways I see the impossible becoming possible in these texts: Paul, an avid persecutor of Christians is called to be an apostle. No one saw that coming. Ananias never saw it coming that he would seek out the violent and notorious persecutor, Paul, and call him

“brother.” In the Gospel reading after a long night of fishing none of the disciples saw it coming that a stranger (they don’t yet recognize it’s Jesus) would suggest going back out into the sea to cast the nets on the other side of the boat (as if they hadn’t done that already? All night long? Riiiiight.). And why did the disciples do what the stranger asked? That doesn’t make sense at all! They’ve been out ALL night, and now he comes along and says “uh, try one more time,” and they DO?! The impossibilities of the story continue to pile up when it works, and they actually catch many fish after such an unproductive night. But the most obvious impossibility is frying up some fish and having breakfast on the beach with Jesus as the morning dawns. *Nobody* imagined that would happen. To steward the resurrection mystery is to cultivate an attitude that says, “It could happen!” Because it DID. And it still DOES.

## **April 21, 2013**

**Acts 9:36-43**

**Psalm 23 (1)**

**John 10:22-30**

Any message that seeks to be stewardship-focused must begin with the generosity of God and urge people to be the conduits through which that generosity might flow. It doesn’t happen very often that the psalm is the chosen primary text for preaching, but as we continue to steward the mystery of the resurrection, Psalm 23 is ideal for lifting up the persistent provision and presence of the resurrected Jesus. It is also an opportunity for people to hear this psalm apart from a funeral setting. How does Jesus provide for us “...in the valley of the shadow” right now? How is Jesus’ presence experienced in our congregations right now? What is Jesus doing for us as our shepherd, and what is Jesus calling us to as shepherds of the people and gifts that we are given? The Acts reading could be used as a secondary text to illustrate one response to these questions. Tabitha (Dorcas) became ill and died. How will God show up and provide during this valley time? Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, comes and resuscitates her; heals her of her illness. He brings joy to those who were grieving. His work became known and people believed in the gospel. And finally, Peter stayed with the people there. He became God’s generous *presence to a new community of believers.*

## **April 28**

**John 13:31-35**

I wonder if Jesus had been asked to give a five-sentence “stewardship sermon” if he might not have spoken the words he says in John 13:33-35. Fundamentally stewardship means to take care of someone or something. In John’s farewell discourse Jesus tells the disciples and us how to take care of things when he is no longer present with us. He uses the words here that reflect what Matthew records him as saying when he was asked which is the greatest commandment. Remember that? It’s something about loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. The Gospel for today says, “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” That could be every congregation’s mission statement and every disciple’s purpose statement.

Jesus continues by describing what the implications of stewarding one another will be: everyone will know that we are Jesus' disciples. Why does Jesus care so much that everyone *know* we are his disciples anyway? What will such knowledge mean? Throughout the Gospel of John, knowing God and being known by God are primary concerns of Jesus'. This "knowing" is not an intellectual pursuit, but a soul-driven intimacy with the Creator. Jesus intends that our loving one another will be the sign that others can see, so that they too will know the transforming love of God. So when we love one another, we are stewarding the knowledge of God for those who live in darkness; their relationship with God depends on how we love one another! What awesome responsibilities God entrusts to us! Imagine every evangelism program starting not with gimmicky marketing or hesitant knocking on doors, but by asking ourselves "how are we loving one another in this community? What are people seeing?"