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Our Place
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Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things. Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to be become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Matthew 16:21-26

Although she is probably best known as the author of the Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane mystery series, Dorothy Sayers contributed much more to the world. She was a playwright, translator whose translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* is considered one of the best, and a theologian who hung out with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as a member of the Inklings. Dorothy Sayers wasn't only an academic, she was a regular church goer and staunch advocate for the ordination of women to the priesthood.

Biographers have summed up her faith and body of work by describing them as incarnational. Dorothy Sayers took very seriously what most of us don't think about much except during Christmas: how incarnational the sacraments and scriptures are. Incarnational meaning in-flesh, physical reality, to embody. To her, this certainly applied to Jesus who is the Word of God made flesh, not that she downplayed his divinity. And it applied to the whole world, which God had made, and redeemed through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

One way her understanding of incarnation manifested itself was in how she viewed the Gospels. To many scholars, the Gospels are a series of stories meant to point us to the truth of who Jesus is. And Dorothy Sayers would not argue this, but to her they were more than stories, the Gospels were what we have left from the life experiences of real people in real places during a very real time. This is important for us who are just as real as the people in the Gospels when we consider today's Gospel lesson where Jesus had some harsh words for his disciple Peter.

There are lots of sermons that like to go after Peter, to pick him apart, shame him for his failures: his failure to listen to what Jesus had just said, his failure to understand (which somehow could insinuate that we who are reading these words today are so much smarter than he was then). Although it has become quite

popular to go after and rip apart people we disagree with on social media, this is not one of those opportunities. Peter's rebuke is not a chance for us to distance ourselves from today's Gospel by making ourselves feel superior. Instead, as Dorothy Sayers's theology reminds us, it is an opportunity to remember Peter was a real person who might embody our experience of faith which makes Peter our link to this Gospel lesson.

So, instead of condemning or criticizing him, let's take a closer look at what is incarnate in this scripture and what Peter is drawing us into. Today's Gospel lesson began with the pronouncement that Jesus started something new with his disciples. He began to show them where all his miracles and parables were headed: to Jerusalem where he will suffer, die, and rise again. Peter, and perhaps the other disciples, were not ready for this new teaching of Jesus. Peter had other things in mind for the messiah that were not necessarily as secular as we might assume. Remember, plenty of religious scholars predicted the messiah would be a military leader who would lead a bloody war that would restore Israel to power. Jesus' teaching about suffering, death, and resurrection didn't jive with this vision of the messiah, or even how some interpreted God's power.

That might be why Peter rebuked him. It is a common rebuke. In my years as a church member and as a priest I experience this kind of rebuke often. It usually comes in the form of some "church expert" or "consultant" trying to sell a parish a program guaranteed to increase membership, attendance, and income, all the things that supposedly make a successful church. Or it might come in the form of a well-meaning person criticizing the music, liturgy, or sermons by saying we need to change those things to "attract more people". Behind such suggestions is the underlying desire to be successful in a way that makes church members and leaders feel comfortable and stable. And if we are honest, we have all had such inclinations from time to time.

This is not so different from what Peter was saying. But as human as these inclinations are, they are not the same as God's vision for the church or humanity. They are not what Jesus embodies; they might be the stuff of financial security, but they aren't the embodied love of God on earth, which is ultimately what the church is supposed to be. Power and money and big numbers are far more fragile and precarious than we are comfortable admitting. And if we build our world around them, we might not survive when times get hard, economies crash, jobs are lost, health is compromised, loved ones are lost, when we are in the midst of a global pandemic.

Jesus' rebuke to Peter is a reminder to us all when we forget to follow the Way of Love, the way of Christ, and find ourselves tempted by the same temptations Jesus once faced in the wilderness: to make and hoard food or some other resource for ourselves instead of sharing, to strive for power and prestige instead of using our privilege to heal divisions in our families, community, and world, to choose violence over peace, to be the biggest and most entertaining instead of being obedient to God. In today's Gospel Jesus says such behavior is putting our thoughts before those of God, and while a human thing to do, is a stumbling block to living into the true purpose of the church.

Which means when Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan," he wasn't being cruel, he was reminding Peter and he was reminding all of us who follow him, where we belong. We belong behind Jesus, letting him – not consultants or the opinionated -- lead us. It is only from this place we will learn to trust that Jesus, the Good Shepherd we believe him to be, will lead us safely through dangerous or difficult times to green pastures, refreshing waters, and tables set with banquets the psalmist writes about in the 23rd Psalm. It is the way we will learn to listen and recognize his voice above the many others competing for our attention. It is the way we will learn to recognize resurrection life incarnate/present/embodied in the world we inhabit today.

The Jesus we follow is the Jesus who lived, who suffered, who died, and who was raised from the dead. When Peter rebuked Jesus, he wasn't saying he didn't want Jesus to suffer. He was rejecting the resurrection. That is what makes his remarks so serious and is why Jesus spoke so harshly. Jesus was beginning to prepare his disciples to follow him as the risen Christ, which would be different from following his earthly ministry.

Remember when Mary Magdalene encountered the Risen Jesus outside the tomb, and he told her not to hold onto him? That is another lesson in following the Risen Jesus. Resurrection life isn't the kind of life that can be held onto, controlled, or kept. It is much too lively. It can only be followed.

That is what Jesus is getting at when he says those who want to follow him must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. None of us likes to hear the part about denying ourselves. Jesus doesn't mean denying ourselves chocolate or watching a movie; he is talking about letting go of valuing high numbers over meaningful engagement, or desiring power over community instead of creating a community of love and equality, or thinking our preferences are better than anyone else's, and letting go of the desire hoard instead of practice generosity, letting go of the desire for revenge and violence instead of forgiving, and letting go of the desire

to control instead of depending on God. Following the risen Christ means following the way of God's love and life. Sometimes that will mean experiencing suffering, especially discomfort. Again, Jesus isn't talking about abuse or staying in abusive situations, like this text has unfortunately been interpreted in the past. Following Jesus means accepting the liberating resurrection life he gives so we can remove ourselves from harmful relationships and circumstances.

Another temptation we often face is the temptation to see today's Gospel as a disembodied story from the past that has no affect on our lives today. But following the Risen Christ is actually, as Dorothy Sayers believed, incarnational, real in every way, and can be manifested in what we say and what we do.

We find ourselves living in extraordinary times, and when we reflect on what it looks like today to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus we could say it looks like wearing a face mask whenever we are in public, even when we feel hot or uncomfortable. It looks like staying six feet away from people. It means worshipping outside instead of inside our building right now. It looks like any of the ways we are being asked to consider the well-being of people we aren't even connected with over our own personal comfort. It means taking time to learn about the covid-19 virus and the ways the rules and mandates we are being asked to follow actually can help give scientists the time they need to develop and distribute vaccines while slowing the spread of the virus. It can even look like supporting the changes being made to slow the spread of the virus instead of complaining about them.

In this moment in time, resurrection life isn't necessarily manifested only in science, it is embodied in the love we are showing for each other, by being willing to make so many changes for one another, by being compassionate and forgiving, and learning to be incarnate, to be present with each other in new ways.

I know these are not easy times to live in. I know many of us long for a return to the way things were. But one of the things I have learned about resurrection life is, if you follow it, resurrection life will lead you into newness of life that is closer to God and each other. These days won't last forever. But we can get lost in them if we don't deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow our Good Shepherd, who leads us even through this pandemic to still waters of refreshment and resurrection life.