

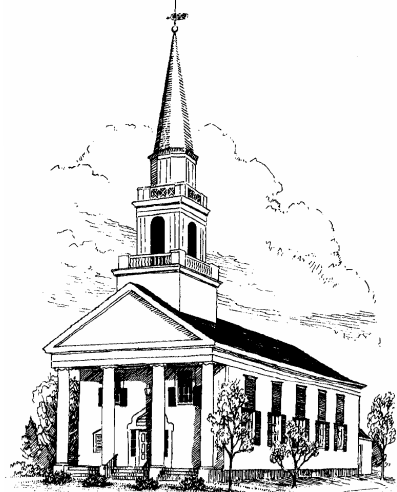
Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from September 13, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg
“It Won’t Be Easy”

Scriptures:
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38



I was returning from a business trip several years ago and my return flight home was scheduled to take off very early in the morning. My client dropped me at the airport in Tampa about 5:30 a.m. and at that hour, of course, it was uncharacteristically quiet and there were very few people around. The monitor told me which gate to approach and as I turned the corner to make my way down the long empty wide concourse, I noticed a small group of folks huddled together giggling quietly and pointing somewhat shyly toward the check-in counter. I looked ahead to where they were pointing and saw him, too, so I held back and gradually joined the small group, surprised, excited, but unsure, hesitant to approach.

“That’s not who I think it is, is it?”

“I don’t know, it sure looks like him.”

“But what would he be doing here?”

“Catching a flight like everybody else!”

“Oh, yeah, it’s him. We just saw him sign an autograph for someone.”

Collectively, we were pretty sure it was him, but we didn’t want to bother him, disturb his privacy. But, c’mon, it was Hulk Hogan! The World Wrestling Federation Champion of the World! In the flesh – Hulk Hogan! Once I was sure it was him, and saw others approaching him, I did walk up and ask him for an autograph for my kids.

Now, here’s the thing about celebrities—in reality, they aren’t really who *you* think they are from TV. Hulk Hogan was polite and soft-spoken and asked me to walk with him to his gate so he wouldn’t miss his flight. I jogged along beside him (because of the huge difference in our sizes) while he scribbled out my kids’ names and signed his name on my slip of paper. Then he kind of rushed off to his gate without saying much else. No big roars, no muscle flexes, no wild eyes, no theatrics, no instructions to remind my kids to take their vitamins and say their prayers as he did all the time on TV. My preconceived notion of Hulk Hogan did not match the reality.

The disciple Peter was married—we know this because we read in the Gospel that Jesus healed his mother-in-law. Peter leaves home, his wife, maybe children, to follow this man Jesus. As we meet him this morning, he’s been with Jesus for a while now, witnessing his healings and exorcisms, his miracles, listening to his teachings ... and something is beginning to

dawn on him. If they had phones during those days, we can imagine Peter calling home every once in a while to speak to his wife:

“Hi, it’s me. Good. Everything OK there? Oh, yeah, the blisters are pretty much healed up—really just one left on my little toe. Yes, we’re getting enough to eat. You wouldn’t believe it if I told you. Hey, I think I’ve figured out something about him. You ready for this? You remember how someone from the House of David is going to come to save us? Liberate us from our oppressors? Throw over Roman rule? Finally give us our power back? It’s him. No, I know it’s him. I’ve been watching and putting all the pieces together. He’s the Messiah. No... I know your mother thinks he’s John the Baptist. Yeah... your sister thinks he’s Elijah. This is not some prophet of old—this is *the* Messiah. OK, I gotta go... we’re leaving for Caesarea Philippi. Yes, I’ll be careful. Yep, I’ll call you later. Yup, love you, too, bye.”

Sure enough, that afternoon, Jesus asks his disciples. Who do they say that I am? And they answer. But who do you say that I am? Peter answers him, “You are the Messiah.” And this is where Peter’s idea of Messiah—the winner, the liberator, the one with the glory and the championship belt, the one who restores our self-determination, gets a reality check. As Harry Adams of Yale Divinity quips: right title, wrong understanding. Jesus tells him *this* Messiah must suffer and be rejected by the higher-ups and killed. Not only that, if you really want to follow me, you better be prepared to do the same. Never mind, self-determination, more like deny yourself altogether. This is clearly not the Messiah Peter had in mind, nor anyone else had in mind, for that matter. Jesus was not the world champion he had envisioned. Martha Moore-Keish of Columbia Seminary writes: “After reading these verses, it is a marvel that anyone at all is left being a follower of Christ.”

Yet, somehow they did. Admittedly, sometimes with one step forward and two steps back, but these disciples did follow him and became his apostles and went out and formed the early church; and many of them, and thousands more, died as martyrs for his sake and for the sake of the gospel. They set their minds on divine things.

Today is an important day in the life of our church. Nine young people in our congregation are beginning the next chapter of their faith journeys toward Confirmation. They have selected their mentors from among the adults in this church who have presented them with brand new Bibles this morning. Their textbooks and journals have arrived and they will spend the next nine months exploring and deciding if they accept the promises made on their behalf at their Baptisms, if they are willing to make those promises themselves. As their vows say, “... to be Christ’s disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior...”

Megan McKenna writes that “true discipleship calls us to sink further and further in the waters of our baptisms, which are mysterious, fearful, and wondrously filled with grace.” Mysterious, fearful and wondrously filled with grace. It won’t be easy. And it shouldn’t be. I have already told our Confirmands that this journey of faith is never over. And you can tell them, too. Because each and every one of us struggles today with what Jesus means by taking up our crosses, theologians and scholars notwithstanding. How do we lose our lives in 2009 in Stonington and Groton? How do we teach our young people to deny themselves in these, their very important formative years, when their sense of self is just emerging, when they are beginning to claim who they are and who they will be as adults?

We find our direction, our hope, our renewed faith, buried in the words that Jesus said to Peter that most scholars agree Peter somehow missed: the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected ... and be killed, *and after three days rise again*. After three days rise again.

Let's be clear that God does not ask us to suffer on purpose. God wants us to be healthy and well-adjusted, not to go around beating up on ourselves—that's not true humility. But Jesus does know, given the condition of the world and how humans operate, that we do risk suffering in his name every time we choose forgiveness over retaliation in a world steeped in fear and defensiveness. We do risk humiliation and rejection by the pervading culture every time we put others' needs ahead of our own selfish motivations for success and status and wealth accumulation; every time we stand up and speak up for those who have been beaten down by others.

Each time we let go of our desperate hanging on to possessions and clinging to control and security, whether it be financial or psychological, we *do* die a little. We die a little to human things, and more and more we set our minds on divine things. What happens? We begin to rise again, to rise above the need to save face, to rise beyond the pull to belong to the social group on top whatever the cost to others, to rise enough above the fray below to see that there's more to this world than me and my schedule and my job and my house and my savings and my political position. We begin to rise to the selves God created us to be: confident in our call to be loving Christians, following in the way of Christ: through the suffering and all our little deaths to life in him.

Peter knew Jesus was the Messiah. Yet he had to witness his suffering and death and rising after three days to understand what that meant. The true Messiah did not roar and flex his muscles and rant in the ring, but quietly submitted and saved the world. That's him alright. Let's walk with him. Amen.

