

I have given this a lot of thought, a lot of serious reflection And I've decided that Jesus drove a Volvo.

Not one of those new fancy ones that look more like BMWs. No, I'm talking about the old, square kind that look like rolling cinder blocks. There may be one quarter panel that's a different color. Maybe a missing hub cap. Maybe a few dents and scratches, just for character. You know the kind I'm talking about. Top speed about 45 miles an hour but solid enough to take a glancing blow from a wrecking ball.

Think about it. How many times have you rolled up to a stoplight to find an old Volvo in front of you? And, what's all over the back? Bumper stickers. Lots of bumper stickers. For every cause you can possibly think of. Greenpeace. Save the whales. A fringe rock band or two. Maybe one of those stickers that says "Visualize whirled peas."

I saw a car like that the other day. Of course, it was covered with stickers. One sticker packed a powerful punch of a message. "I (heart) Haters." We put a picture of it in yesterday's Caldwell This Week newsletter.

I looked at that sticker and said to myself, "The nerve!"

I didn't have time to follow the car around to see if it was Jesus behind the wheel. But only Jesus could promote such audacious idea, right? Yes, Jesus drove a Volvo with a sticker that said "I (heart) Haters." Because Jesus told us to, "Love your enemies."

Perhaps I should have chased that car down because only Jesus could explain to us just how we are supposed to love our enemies in these mean-spirited, bitterly divided times in our world, in our country, in our state.

But here is the good news. Christ is risen. All things are made new.

Today, we are given one of several stories in the gospels about the resurrected Christ. We are only two weeks passed Easter. The 50-day season of Eastertide, when we dwell especially with the world-changing good news of Christ's defeat of death, goes on for a few more weeks. That's a good thing. We shouldn't be in too big a hurry to leave Easter behind. We should dwell with the disciples as they bump into the resurrected Jesus time and again and try to understand the meaning of the resurrection for the world, our world, too.

The final two words of today's reading from the gospel of John are "Follow me." Follow me. Like it or not, that includes loving haters. To follow Jesus is to love haters. No way around it. So let's unpack the story that leads up to those closing words of John's gospel.

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Peter needed to get away.

Of course he did. For three years he had been traveling from town to town following Jesus. Then they tried, tortured and crucified the one in whom Peter had placed all his hope. So Peter decided what a lot of us choose when we need some time away.

“I’m going fishing,” he told the other disciples. They thought about it for a moment and said, “We’re in.”

So they all went fishing. But this time, as in others, they needed help. A little known piece of Bible trivia is that, in the gospels at least, the disciples never caught any fish without Jesus’ help. Maybe that’s more than trivia. Maybe there is a whole sermon in that. But that’s for another day.

This time, they struck out until a mysterious figure suggested they throw their nets out on just one side of the boat. Bingo. A monster catch. A night’s work in one toss. But Jesus didn’t stop there. He invited them ashore and cooked their fish for them for a nice breakfast.

That’s the way it is, with our savior, isn’t it? He provides for us. He invites us in. He feeds us. He calls us to follow him. He knows when we are hungry, spiritually hungry, physically hungry, in need of the kind of sustenance only the sustainer can provide. Follow him, yes, but first he feeds us. And because of that very assurance, that never-failing promise, this story tells us another thing about what it is to follow the Christ.

At some point or another, we’ve got to come clean with Jesus.

And that’s how it was with Peter that morning at the shore. After Jesus gives the disciples fishing tip that fills their nets, the light bulb goes off for the impetuous one. He recognizes Jesus.

Stripped down to his loin cloth while fishing, Peter somehow has enough wits about him to put on some clothes before meeting the resurrected Lord. But then he doesn’t wait for the boat to come ashore. He jumps in the water and swims ashore, so eager is he to see the risen Christ in the flesh and blood.

Every time I read this story, I think of that scene in the movie Forrest Gump. After surviving the Viet Nam war, but losing his closest buddy, Forrest returns to take over his buddy’s shrimping business. He is about as lousy a shrimper as the disciples were fishermen.

One day he is out on the water, lackadaisically trolling his nets through the water. Suddenly he sees his former commanding officer waving to him from a nearby dock. So

excited is Forrest to see Lieutenant Dan that he jumps right off his shrimp boat. The only trouble was that he was the only one on the boat.

So it is with Peter that day on the Sea of Tiberius. But when we take a closer look at this story, we remember why Peter was so eager to see Jesus. Three times. Three times he had denied the living Christ when Christ was being arrested by the Romans, who would go on to crucify him. Three times Peter pretended as if Christ Jesus meant nothing to him.

Who among us hasn't done the same? Who among us doesn't deny the Lordship of Jesus every week, if not every day? Who among us fails to live as Jesus taught every day?

That's why Peter needed to come clean with Jesus. The same goes for us.

Three times, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times, Jesus wanted to hear Peter's response, "Yes, Lord, I love you." It wasn't that Jesus didn't know Peter's heart. This wasn't about Jesus not knowing Peter. It was about Peter needing to say it aloud three times, to hear it aloud three times. We know how our God works in threes, don't we?

If we are to follow Jesus, as Jesus invites, we have to come clean. That is why we, as Presbyterians, are a confessional people. We confess our faith to declare it to the world as bold statements of who and whose we are. We also confess, as often as we can, that we fail to live fully into the grace and forgiveness of Easter morning.

That is why we have to come clean. To hear ourselves say it. To hear ourselves confess it. We are imperfect. We do not have all the answers. We are not all that and a bag of chips. We don't know as much as we think. We are no more special than any other broken human being, any other child of God.

And then, when we come clean with God, when we come clean with ourselves, we come clean with each other, then Jesus shoots straight with us.

Did you notice what happened when Peter came clean with Jesus? Once Jesus heard what he needed to hear from the repentant Peter, Jesus shot straight with him. He broke the news that he never promised them a rose garden, as the old country song goes. He trusted them with the full truth. He told them, in case they didn't know it already, that the world can be a violent place.

That's Jesus' point, I think, in the line about how one day, someone will take us by the belt and take us where we don't want to go. He's right, of course. Just look around, after all. Is this the world, the society, the sense of community we would choose to enter if it were entirely up to us?

Not lately, anyway.

The world is a violent place. Yes, there is Isis and gun violence. There is the rampant abuse of women. But I am not talking about just physical violence.

Every day, cultures, peoples, nations, governments do violence to others in other ways. It is economic violence. It is social violence. Cultural violence. Legislative violence. Racial violence. Homophobic violence. Emotional violence.

We know about that here in North Carolina. I don't need to recount all the ways that our state legislature has done violence to others in its recent emergency session. House Bill 2 has drawn the ire of a wide coalition of opponents. The heat is still building. And the rhetoric has become red hot. Name-calling. Labeling. Shaming. Dismissing. Debasing. Dehumanizing.

And you know what? It's coming from both sides.

Into all of this Jesus says. "Follow me." Into all of this Jesus says "Feed my sheep." The prince of peace says, "Be non-violent, in your speech, in your thoughts, in your heart, in the practice of your faith."

"Feed my sheep," he says. Give life. Practice life-giving interaction and relationship. Build up rather than tear down. Be strong, Seek justice. But be honorable. Be peaceful.

Let's come clean and count the ways and the times we have, to the contrary, reverted to stereotyping those with whom we disagree. Those whom we want to reduce to non-thinking, non-feeling, and just plain wrong. We choose up sides and remain in echo chambers where we only hear those views we agree with – in our friendships, in reading, in the media, on social media.

Last week, I wrote an op-ed piece in the paper about the effect of HB2 on the working poor. Maybe I only advanced the name calling. I tried not to but I was frustrated.

Also last week, in my blog, I mentioned the practices of non-violent communications. That is one way we can follow Jesus. It is one way we can feed his sheep. But it requires that we see and grant credence to all sheep. Not just black ones or white ones. Not just Democratic or Republican sheep, liberal or moderate or conservative. Not just straight or gay or rich or poor and on and on.

Non-violent communication isn't about not engaging in direct conversation and level-headed exchange. It doesn't have to be about agreeing. It is about listening openly and respectfully. One of the practices of non-violent communications is to describe those with whom we disagree by their actions and behaviors rather than giving into the feel-good instinct to label them, to reduce them to the convenience of just a word or two.

Another life-giving practice is to know the opponent's context, heritage, and history. To know what shaped them to believe what they believe, because, all too often, our

opponent has been shaped by norms not of their making or choosing. They just haven't really explored the other side. Maybe that is true of us, too.

We should also look for what is their real source of pain, despite what might be coming out of their mouths. To ask questions rather than impose answers.

We may disagree with the way that a certain piece of legislation came about. We may disagree with the issue or the aim of it. But we do not follow Christ if our reaction matches their action, if our ways are no more honorable, no more tolerant, no more respectful than those with whom we disagree.

Let us remember that, in today's story, Jesus provided for his disciples and that he fed them before he charged them to follow him. Left to their own, the disciples weren't finding the fish, they weren't finding sustenance, and they weren't receiving life.

With Christ's guidance, they experienced abundance, their fishing nets came in overflowing. They received what they needed and more. When it comes to following Christ, when it comes to feeding his sheep, we do not have enough on our own. We do not always cast our nets in the right ways and in the right places.

When it comes to practicing the ways of non-violence, we cannot do it by ourselves. But we follow a God of abundance, who calls us, equips us and feeds us. A God who meets our weakness and shortcoming with divine provision.

Isn't this the after-story we celebrate in Eastertide?

That is what today's scripture is, by the way. Biblical scholars have largely concluded that today's verses are an epilogue to the Gospel of John. Written in a different style and language, it is an obvious afterword, a supplement, a P.S., one more story that some editors felt had to be added.

It answers the question of "so what" that the gospel asks.

Shouldn't our lives be just such an epilogue to the mystery and the majesty of Easter?

Amen.