

Resurrection Witness: Risky Faith

Acts 9: 8-19 John 21: 15-19

If you're a news watcher, then you may have heard a fair amount recently about Elon Musk, Tesla Motors, and SpaceX. I had spoken about Elon Musk before. Since your memory is notoriously no better than mine, let me repeat myself. You're old, too; you know we repeat ourselves.

Elon Musk made a couple hundred million dollars when he sold PayPal to eBay. Hey, life is good. What's next? Let's solve the world's problems with all this money. Elon Musk thinks big.

No manned space missions planned but Elon Musk wants to go to Mars. He forms SpaceX from scratch. They have lots of failures as they try to perfect the incredibly complex operation of launching a rocket into space. Huge cost savings can be made if you reuse the first stage launcher. His aim is to fire the rocket, and when it's done its job, bring it back to earth for a soft landing, ready to re-use very quickly.

People think this is nuts. First, you don't start a rocket company from scratch; rockets are done by Boeing and Lockheed, big players. Second, it's hard enough to launch a rocket, but to return the first stage is absurdly difficult.

Even Musk's fortune can't carry the company, and they have a bunch of failures. They're down to their last rocket, their last chance to prove themselves worthy of a \$1.5 billion NASA contract to resupply the space station and do other launches. Of course, it works and they get the money, but that was a close call.

Then they show the feasibility of landing a first stage in tests. After several failures trying to land at sea, they bring a launcher to a successful landing at an air force base. But Musk wants to land it on a platform in the ocean just off the launch site - an oversized barge, really, pictured in the Fairfielder. On Friday, SpaceX landed its first stage on that little platform. The video is amazing and I'll post it. From the edge of the atmosphere in space, descending miles to land on this tiny little spot in the middle of the ocean, it's phenomenal!

But Musk had more ideas. He also saw how global warming was ruining the planet, how cars were a huge source of emissions, and how none of the car companies were doing much to develop battery powered cars. So, he funds a car company dedicated to building electric cars, Tesla Motors. This comes only a year or so after starting SpaceX.

Again, the whole thing gets mocked. All electric vehicles are unaffordable, don't go very far, batteries are too big, heavy, and very costly. These kinds of cars just aren't ready for prime time. But Musk will hear none of it.

Tesla Motors burns through money. They're just producing their first very pricey sports cars which are getting rave reviews, but then the financial collapse happens in 2008 and all of their funding dries up. On their last legs, Musk drops the rest of his fortune - \$100 million - into Tesla Motors.

That still isn't an answer, but help arrives in 2009 from an advanced technology loan program from the government started in the Bush administration: \$465 million.

The scoffers howl, sure that taxpayer money is getting thrown away on a loan that will never be repaid. One industry publication starts a new column entitled "Tesla Death Watch."

Moving from producing the high end, six figure, Roadster sports car, they then produced the Model S, a four door sedan starting at \$70,000, then a crossover called the Model X. Finally, they unveiled the Model 3 just 10 days ago which has a base price of \$35,000. By the end of the first week, over 325,000 people had made a \$1,000 deposit to buy a Model 3. Bear in mind, Tesla Motors has only sold 125,000 cars in its entire existence.

And that government loan: it was repaid in full with interest in only 4 years, long before Ford and Nissan would repay theirs.

These bold new ideas and the companies formed to bring such dreams into being were hugely risky from the beginning, and it wasn't long before crises forced Musk to invest virtually his entire fortune. There was a lot of faith and lot of risk.

Risk is something we shy away from as we get older, wiser, and comfortable. We're all pretty much alike in that regard. And the church is an amazing reflection of our risk averse nature, traditionally being a place where the comfortable go to be comforted, like that's what they need. Well, that's what they want. It is truly another world to realize the risks associated with being a Jesus follower in the earliest days. That was a time when faith witness was risky.

Looking at the scriptures, in Acts 9, Saul of Tarsus is on the march to Damascus to round up some Jesus People. Saul was introduced to us in Acts 6 where he presided over the stoning death of Stephen in Jerusalem. Here Saul is on a mission, hunting down these Jesus People and getting rid of them.

Striding toward Damascus, Saul is suddenly driven to his knees by a brilliant light bearing the Lord's voice who challenges, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Stupefied, Saul asks, "Who are you, Lord?" – obviously aware of the divine – as the voice identifies itself as Jesus. Jesus tells Saul to go into Damascus where he will be told what to do – with an implicit tone of 'don't even think of doing otherwise.'

Saul now finds himself blind. For three days afterward, he cannot see, and neither eats nor drinks. Hmm. 3 days?

Meanwhile, **busy** Jesus pays a visit in a vision to Ananias in Damascus, a faithful Jesus follower, a likely target of Saul's coming persecution.

Ananias is (I think) an even better story than Saul and his conversion. Ananias is more central to this passage than Saul. I think we typically miss this. The story is really about Ananias' faith in a world where faith is deadly risky.

Ananias is instructed by Jesus in the vision to go to Saul. Ananias tries to explain why he *can't* go to this man. Hello? Is the Lord aware that Saul is a murderous opponent and persecutor? And Ananias is probably first on Saul's list – begins in "A."

At this excuse-making (which really sounds pretty legitimate), the Lord gets testy, declaring emphatically, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument...." Wisely Ananias complies and Saul's conversion to becoming one of the Jesus People is completed.

But note what little patience Jesus had for excuses and dodgy explanations. God had an expectation from Ananias, that those declaring their faith commitment would actually live up to it with **courage and obedience**. God has that expectation from us, but I'm sure our behavior, our attitudes, and our excuses make the Lord shake his head in frustration.

Part of the commitment we make as people faithful to the Lord, people of resurrection witness, is to seek to grow in our witness and discover new life in him always. While we find many ways of accomplishing growth and renewal of life, there are key things we're missing. We stick to the safe side of witness. We aren't alone. We may have a kindred spirit with Peter.

In John 21, Jesus has a peculiar one-on-one dialogue with Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves Jesus. Three times it seems Peter affirms his love for Jesus, and three times Jesus says something like, "Feed my sheep." In our reading of the Bible, we may have gotten used to repetition that seems to have little purpose – we write it off – but this is a hard dialogue to understand. Why *does* the dialogue keep repeating?

My theory about understanding this passage isn't in any commentary. Scholars have a wide variety of schemes to explain it. Most favor the **rehabilitation** of Peter, or '**reinstatement**' as the heading in the pew Bible suggests. They feel Peter gets a threefold **commissioning**. That **might** make sense, except Peter is dismayed and pained by the dialogue. Further, Jesus appears dissatisfied, insistently repeating the same question. No one is happy here. This is definitely **not** commissioning.

This has also been regarded as a variant tradition of Peter's threefold **denial** of Jesus, but there are arguments against that theory, too. Jesus keeps asking the same question because he is **not** getting the response from Peter that he wants to hear.

Clearly something is amiss in the text. Most dialogue is formed in couplets, like question then answer, or a statement followed by a response. Here we have unfinished couplets. We have a question by Jesus and an answer by Peter, followed by a statement

by Jesus and, well, no response, nothing by Peter. Peter is supposed to be saying something in response to Jesus and he isn't.

What the *listener* would hear from a storyteller is dead silence from Peter. The *reader* doesn't get that verbal cue to what's missing – silence by Peter – and gets confused. When Jesus says, *Feed my sheep*, Peter is supposed to say something like, *Yes, Lord, I will shepherd your sheep*. But Peter doesn't say that; he chokes. And Jesus starts over again.

Why is Peter so reluctant to say he'll shepherd the Lord's sheep? Remember what happened to the last shepherd, Jesus, and what Jesus said would happen to the "good shepherd." What does the "good shepherd" do? He loves the sheep, and lays down his life for the sheep. Peter isn't thrilled with that idea, knowing how that ended up for Jesus, crucifixion and all. So Peter is silent when Jesus seeks his acceptance of that difficult role. It's too much for Peter. He wants to dodge this one badly. And we can't really blame Peter. This is an awesome, sacrificial level of commitment.

If we read on, we see it gets even stickier. Frustrated by Peter's refusal to take the role of shepherd, Jesus reminds Peter that he had done the carefree thing earlier in his life, doing what he liked and going where he liked whenever he liked. Now it's time to take faithful responsibility in witness, even unto death. It's time for a witness that risks faithfully, risking everything

Even when Jesus barks at Peter, *Follow me!* Peter keeps looking for an "out." He hasn't dodged Jesus and he is desperate for a worthy excuse. Keep reading and he points to the beloved disciple and says, *How about him, your special disciple? Let him take this death-sentence job*. God is never impressed with that reasoning.

Jesus essentially tells Peter to mind his own business, and closes: ***You must follow me*** (vs. 22). That is where the story abruptly ends.

God has an expectation that the faithful will follow through with an obedient, loving witness. God wants us to grow into progressively greater commitments to serve, impelled by a love for the Lord, and a love for sisters and brothers in the family of God.

Peter has reached his limit, and tries to refuse this. His silence is really answering the Lord: "No, Lord; I don't truly love you that much." I am **unwilling** to risk, to truly risk all, even life itself, in a loving witness, in loving service to my Savior.

God doesn't call us routinely into grave dangers like Peter. But God expects that the faithful will always seek to grow spiritually, learning more of his ways, experiencing the challenges of a risky faithfulness, and discovering the insights that come from sharing with others. When our excuses and our dodges pop out, we're reminded that God is calling us out on a faithful limb, to risk and to love, and we're expected to pursue such paths, sooner or later.

May we never let our excuses run our lives or shape the level of our devotion to our Lord or to each other as the living body of the risen Christ. May the call to very risky love be practiced by us, preparing us for the day of the Lord's calling to witness to him.