

## WONDERING “WHAT IF?”

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### *Personalities of the Passion: Simon Peter*

*One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with Jesus?” Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed. (John 18:26-27)*

Amateur historians typically enjoy delving into the hypothetical, and asking the question, “What if?” What if, at certain critical moments the course of events had zigged instead of zagged? How would life today be different? What if, on June 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s limo driver had not made a wrong turn in Sarajevo, and stalled in a lane where Gavrilo Princip sat in a café, gun in hand? Might we have avoided the First World War? Twenty-four years later in 1938, what if the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had stood up to Hitler rather than appeasing him? What we know now is that Hitler’s own generals thought he was being dangerously reckless with his territorial claims. Indeed, they were going to oust him at that point if any European leader had stared him down. So what if Chamberlain had said no: “This far you shall come and no farther?” Might we have avoided the Second World War? Or was it all inevitable?

Perhaps the most intriguing of these “What If” scenarios involves Abraham Lincoln. On a Good Friday long ago, in 1865, Lincoln was at Ford’s Theater in Washington DC enjoying a production of *Our American Cousin*. Shortly after 10 pm John Wilkes Booth entered the unguarded presidential box and shot Lincoln in the back of the head. At the time the nation was truly at a watershed moment, when it was actually possible to restart the American experiment as a land of liberty and justice for all. If anyone could have forged a new heart and spirit in the soul of the nation it was Lincoln, whose vision was malice towards none and charity for all. Lincoln died the next morning, and his successor, Andrew Johnson, proved to be a disastrously incapable, mean-spirited leader who set back the gains of the Civil War and breathed new life into the defeated south.

How do we even begin to assess the damage that Booth and Johnson left in their wake? What if history had zigged instead of zagged? What if Lincoln had decided not to go to the theater that Good Friday long ago? What if Lincoln had been able to serve out his full second term in office, and preside over reconstruction after the Civil War? Might civil rights in this country be one-hundred years ahead of where they are now? As with all the “What If” scenarios, we will never know. But this one will always haunt the American soul.

This past week, as I thought and prayed over the disciple Peter in preparation for our Good Friday service, I caught myself delving into the hypothetical and asking the question, “What if?” What if Peter had acted differently on the first Good Friday long ago? Most of us think we know a thing or two about Peter. He was a fisherman when he answered the call to follow Jesus. We read in the Gospels that he had a boat, a wife, a mother-in-law, and a brother named Andrew, who was also one of the twelve disciples whom Jesus gathered around himself. Peter’s birth name was actually Simon, but Jesus gave him the nickname, Rock, which in Aramaic is Cephas. In Greek it is Petros, and in English it is Peter. Among the other disciples, three seemed to form an inner circle around Jesus: Peter, James, and John. The Gospels always list Peter first, suggesting that he was a leader: Jesus’ most trusted associate.

Peter was fiercely loyal and dependable, if not a bit impulsive. For example, on the night before Jesus died he knew that his enemies were closing in to arrest him. He foresaw that all of the disciples would flee for their own lives, and said as much to them. Peter declared emphatically that he would never abandon Jesus. He would lay down his life for Jesus. “Not so,” answered Jesus. “Before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.” All four Gospels go on to attest that Peter fulfilled the dark prophesy, and three times that night denied that he knew Jesus. The denials occurred at the home of the high priest, where the authorities first took Jesus after arresting him in the Garden of Gethsemane. To his credit, Peter followed while all the others fled. He was there in the outer courtyard, mingling among the soldiers and servants who were keeping warm by a charcoal fire. The details vary as to who the accusers were, but every time someone fingered Peter as a follower of Jesus, he denied it.

Since then two-thousand years of preachers and readers of the Gospels have tried to understand Peter’s denials. Some rise to his defense. Of course in that moment he denied knowing Jesus because he didn’t want to blow his cover. He was there gathering information, perhaps planning some sort of rescue. Others condemn Peter for what they see as a grave moral failure. He chose to save himself while just a short distance away Jesus was being mocked, beaten, and unjustly charged. Still others see Peter as a strange victim of fate, even predestination. What he did was necessary to fulfill the grim prophecies. How do we assess the damage? In the end Peter’s actions certainly don’t rise to the level of Judas, or Caiaphas, or Pontius Pilate. Peter was no John Wilkes Booth or Andrew Johnson. Perhaps we might say that with Peter we’re not angry, just disappointed. Even still, Luke (22:61) records what must have been a devastating moment for Peter. When the cock crowed after the third denial, Jesus turned and looked at Peter. What did the look convey? We don’t know. We can only guess. Was it, “Shame on you, Peter?” Or perhaps, “I told you so, Peter?” Preachers and commentators often work very hard to read some positive, loving message in the look that Jesus shot at Peter, but it seems a stretch to me. Three of the Gospels report that Peter went out and wept bitterly when the cock crowed. It was probably the lowest, the worst moment of Peter’s life.

So I return to the question, “What if?” What if Peter had affirmed rather than denied Jesus? Let’s delve into the hypothetical and imagine how things might have gone differently had Peter answered his accusers with a vigorous, compelling “Yes, I *am* one of his followers! And let me tell you why I think *you* should be one too.” Certainly, Peter had been in the presence of Jesus long enough to share the gospel with the crowd around the fire in high priest’s courtyard. He could have told them about the miracles: five-thousand fed with five loaves of bread, the raising of Lazarus and Jairus’ daughter from the dead, the forgiveness of sins, the lame taking up their pallets and walking, the blind receiving their sight, and the demon-possessed whose tortured minds Jesus set aright. What if Peter pressed on with the assertion that Jesus was no criminal? He had done nothing wrong. He had taught nothing but the way of God’s love. He was being unjustly charged. It’s not too far-fetched to imagine that Peter might have enlisted some populist support on the outside, which was something the authorities on the inside feared could easily happen, and desperately wanted to avoid.

Then consider that inside the high priest’s house Jesus already had some secret followers on the Sanhedrin, the council that was subjecting him to the corrupt trial. Nicodemus, who had come to Jesus by night with sincere questions of faith, was on the council and likely inside the house. Joseph of Arimathea was also on the council, and therefore inside witnessing the proceedings. Mark (15:43) tells us that the next day, after Jesus had died, Joseph “took courage” and asked Pilate for the body to arrange a proper burial. Those are the words: “took courage.” What if Nicodemus and Joseph on the inside, emboldened by a clamoring crowd on the outside that had been roused into action by Peter’s affirmations, had taken courage a few hours earlier?

Might they have turned the tide and saved Jesus? As with all the “what if” scenarios, we will never know.

One thing we do know is this: that the killing of Abraham Lincoln was unquestionably a bad Friday. It was a bad Friday with disastrous consequences that roil the nation still. But the day that Jesus died bears a different name. From earliest times we who call ourselves Christians have named the day “Good.” Why? The answer that makes sense to me lies in the notion that Jesus did not want Peter to arrange a rescue, neither in the high priest’s courtyard, nor in the Garden of Gethsemane, nor anywhere. In fact, just a few hours earlier Peter had made a bold move to save the day. He unsheathed a sword and struck out at those who came to arrest Jesus. What did Jesus say? “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me? (John 18:11)” So throughout the days of that first Holy Week, even on this day we call Good, Jesus was exactly where he had angled to be. He was determined to act out an ancient prophetic script, and drink from the cup that God had poured for him, even if it meant death on a cross.

How did Jesus discern such a calling that most of us would consider suicidal? The mystery is far too deep for any one sermon to explain, but essentially, it seems that in his own study of the Scriptures Jesus had seized upon some overlooked passages about a mysterious figure we’ve come to call the Suffering Servant. If you’ve ever listened to Handel’s *Messiah*, the prophecies will sound familiar: *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).* The servant would make himself an offering for sin. He would pour out his soul to death, and his death would accomplish reconciliation between the people and God. Jesus had come to the agonizing conclusion that he of all people was the One sent from God to be the Suffering Servant and heal the nation. History turns on a dime, and it would turn on Jesus.

When the cock crowed, Jesus turned to look at Peter, and the two met eyes. I wonder again, what did the look convey? We will never know, but perhaps it was a “What if” question with forward rather than backward momentum: What if you trusted me, Peter? What if you stopped trying to save the day and trusted me? Even though Peter went out and wept, every indication is that in short order, he did indeed take courage and trust Jesus. His worst moment neither paralyzed him nor defined him. Weeping may have spent the night on Friday and Saturday, but what would happen on Sunday morning taught Peter to look forward in hope, not backward with remorse.

Suppose that Jesus is turning to look on us today – on you and me – with the same question he just might have been asking Peter: What if you trusted me? What if you took courage now, and left here at the foot of the cross all your worst moments? Your deepest regrets and your darkest fears, you can give them to the one who promises to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows. *The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

What if you took the chance that Easter is coming, and that Jesus lives? What if you looked forward in hope, not backward with remorse? As with all the “What if” questions of history, you will never know until you try it.