

An outbreak of Easter (Luke 5:1-11)

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

In a lecture on “The Renewal of the Inner City Church,” Jim Wallis told a group of pastors true stories of declining inner-city churches that had, by the grace of God, rediscovered their mission and begun to thrive. I was inspired, but in the conversation afterwards one pastor after another criticized Wallis’s speech. They accused him of looking at the church through rose-colored glasses. One even implied that he had lied.

That evening I told Wallis that I was appalled by the group’s reaction. “I wasn’t,” he said. “That’s the reaction I always get from mainline, liberal pastors. They are amazed when God wins. Scared to death that Easter just might, after all, be true.”

Luke includes a story of Jesus’ homiletical success with a great crowd “pressing in upon him to hear the word of God,” followed by a frustrating night of fishing failure in which the disciples “caught nothing.” Then, when Jesus speaks, the disciples realize astounding, net-bursting success. It’s comforting to see Jesus’ sermons so well received after the unpleasantness at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:21-30). Now Jesus is master not only of the word of God, but also of fish. We who so often feel powerless over the elusiveness of language, the scarcity of natural resources, the horror of world hunger, are thrilled to witness the unveiled, magical power of Jesus.

It’s too soon in Luke or the new year for an Easter story. Still, any time we’re working the night shift with Jesus, we must be prepared for an outbreak of Easter. We witness what it’s like to be astounded by a death-defying Jesus, moved from failure and scarcity to life and triumph. It’s wonderful.

Or is it? The reaction of Peter—the premier, quixotic disciple, the first of the church—to all this abundance-producing power? “Get out of here; I’m a sinner!” Last Sunday they wanted Jesus out of Nazareth because of his preaching. Now they want Jesus out of Galilee because of his fishing.

Peter moves from the security of fixed, failed reality—“We fished all night and have nothing”—into full, uncontained reality. The water is deep and dark, spurring Peter

to sense the gap between his world and Jesus' new creation. Peter moves from calling Jesus "Master" to the even more exalted "O Lord!" Then things become unmanageable and scary: Peter sees his situation as a lack of faith rather than a lack of fish, and he blurts out, "Get out of here, Jesus," literally in the Greek, "Get out of my neighborhood!"

Personally, I've got a better theology of ministry on Good Friday ("Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures"), with all sorts of sound sociological, psychological reasons for death and defeat, than I have a pastoral theology robust enough for Easter ("He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures"). Most of my sermons, even in Epiphany or Easter, work the theme: "Ten reasons why you are not really the Body of Christ even though you thought you were when you came to church this morning." There's a reason why Marcus Borg, in *The Heart of Christianity*, labors to disjoin the "pre-Easter Jesus" from the "post-Easter Jesus." It is easier, I think, to be in the boat with Borg's historical Jesus—wisdom teacher/movement initiator/social prophet—than with Jesus the Resurrected Christ who rocks the hell out of my dead and dying world. Though Jesus tells us, "Don't be afraid" when he promises to teach us to fish like him, it's scary. Get out of here, Jesus.

I was not present at the finance committee meeting the night they voted on next year's budget. Next morning, I got a call from the chair. "Preacher," she said, "great meeting last night. I opened with prayer and it was as if the Holy Spirit descended on us. With little discussion we unanimously approved next year's budget—a 10 percent increase over this year's. It was wonderful! There's a new spirit in this congregation and we're going to ride with it."

I said, in love, "Let me get this straight. The church that is five percent behind on this year's budget is going to have a ten percent increase next year? That's crazy! I'm the spiritual leader of this congregation. I will tell you when the Holy Spirit gets here. There is no way that you will pledge that budget!"

"Well, you weren't there and we've already voted, so that's that," she replied.

On Sundays during October, the chair reported on our progress during worship. The second Sunday in October she rose at the beginning of the service and said, "I never thought I'd live to see this day in this church. I am pleased to announce that we have pledged next year's budget in full!"

The church erupted in spontaneous applause.

“Which is all the more amazing considering that this is a huge increase over this year’s budget.” Applause again.

“Now, as I remember, there was somebody who said, ‘You will never pledge that budget.’ Help me remember. Who said, ‘That’s crazy, you will never pledge that budget’? Who said that?”

Sometimes I despise the anticlericalism of the laypeople as much as I fear the unwanted intrusions of the Holy Spirit. It isn’t easy when you are fishing with Jesus. Get out of here, Jesus.

Stanley Hauerwas says that our culture is built on the fear of death. He thinks this explains our health care system, our economy, our government, Gold’s Gym and all the rest. I am now fond of saying that this culture is built on an even greater fear—the threat of being raised from the dead.