

## Following to the Cross

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“But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end” (Matt 26:58, ESV).

Last week during the monthly meeting of the justice, advocacy, and compassion (JAC) ministry at my church, Metro Community Church (Metro), one of the team members asked, “What would Metro do if US Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials (ICE) were to show up on the streets of Englewood? How would Metro respond?” He asked what I had been thinking for a while. Metro is a multiethnic church, but the majority of the congregation is Asian American. We have a growing Latino population. What would happen if ICE showed up in our local community looking for people who are undocumented? It is a real fear of ours. We are concerned about some members of our congregation, as well as their family members and others in the community. Over a month ago, a woman came to me for prayer one Sunday, not for herself but to pray for the children at the school where she works, as some of them are undocumented. Another man came to me crying, asking for prayer because he feared for some of his relatives.

Many are afraid, not just at Metro but around the country, even in this room. And the question my brother in Christ posed to me is the question I pose to all of us this evening. What will you do? What will your church do should ICE show up on your church’s doorstep or in your community? How will you contend with the Bible’s mandate to welcome the stranger when it stands against the government’s potential policy of mass deportation? How will you support people in your community?

As a pastor, I can’t ignore this question. As a Christian, I can’t walk away from it.

What are the pressing issues your congregation brings to you? What are the issues the Spirit brings to your attention as you watch the news or live in your community? What will you do about them? Each one of these questions is an invitation from Jesus. And the ultimate question being asked is, *What is the church going to do?*

This is the question beneath Martin Luther King Jr.'s pondering over sixty years ago in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." My assignment for you this week is to read it. "In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church....Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists."<sup>1</sup> The most pressing issues of King's time were those of racism, poverty, and war. This has not changed. In fact, these are the foundations of most of the justice issues we encounter today. Have you ever asked yourself what would you have done in the 1950s or 1960s? No doubt probably all of us in this room would say we would have been on the side of King, on the side of righteousness, on the side of justice, on the side of Jesus. We forget, however, that during King's lifetime, he regularly received death threats, was called a communist, a terrorist, and everything but a child of God and was ultimately assassinated for daring to follow the convictions of our Lord. Only in retrospect do we acknowledge and commemorate his life, legacy, and commitment to love and justice. So when we daydream about how we would have stood on the right side of justice had we lived in the time of King or been of age, we need to look no further to answer the question than to look at what we are doing today. What has the church been doing? What is the church willing to do now? What are you willing to do now? Will we, will you, stand up for those who are poor, oppressed, marginalized, abandoned, mistreated, and abused?

Why has the church been so uniformly silent on these issues? One reason is fear. We have long grappled with the ethical dilemma of what will we do when (not if) Jesus's teachings and commands conflict with the status quo, popular opinion, or government initiatives? It's Bonhoeffer before Nazi Germany, King before Jim Crow, Mandela before apartheid. Every generation has to grapple with our fear because justice requires standing up to power. It requires resistance against individuals and systems that promote the well-being of the strong and wealthy at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. Any time you confront the

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," accessed February 28, 2025, [https://minio.la.utexas.edu/webeditor-files/coretexts/pdf/1963\\_mlk\\_letter.pdf](https://minio.la.utexas.edu/webeditor-files/coretexts/pdf/1963_mlk_letter.pdf).

evils of racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, and socioeconomic inequity you can expect backlash. And that backlash could mean social isolation or the loss of one's social capital. It could mean death threats. It could mean the loss of your job. It could mean losing half of your church. It could mean the fracture of relationships. It could mean being canceled or being retaliated against. It could also mean death. It is fear that keeps many Christians from standing up for justice and being instruments of righteousness and reconciliation. It's fear!

When we experience fear, our bodies automatically and unconsciously respond in some manner. Physiologists have determined that when we are afraid, our bodies release the hormones epinephrine and adrenaline which cause us to fight, move into flight, freeze, or fawn.<sup>2</sup> All of these responses are our bodies' biological ways of self-preservation.

And so we have a choice to make. We have a decision to make. How will we respond to injustice around us, knowing the potential consequences? Some of us will respond with fight—but not the kind of fighting you might be thinking about. Our response will be resistance, not to the injustice, but to the one making the request for intervention. We fight against the person who brought it to our attention rather than the issue itself. Or we rebuff their concerns as hysterical or exaggerated and refuse to further engage. That's fighting in the face of fear. The other option is to flee. This means simply to ignore the problem. You are aware of it, but you leave it for someone else's attention. This is not just a fear response but also a fear response rooted in despair. Disappointment has beaten you down so hard that rather than hope for change, you ignore the pain to avoid any further disappointment. You flee. Some will freeze. It's easier to act like both the problem and you will disappear. If you don't make eye contact with it, then maybe it won't notice you and will go away. Or fawn, join the other side. That seems to be the winning side anyway.

Will the church fight, flee, freeze, fawn—or choose another path? Could there be a way that is not necessarily a biological response but a response of the heart? Jesus offers us another way. It's not an easy way nor necessarily our default way. But it's his way. *Jesus tells us to follow.* Jesus calls us not to fight, flee, freeze, or fawn in times of fear but to follow.

This is Peter's struggle when we find him in the text. There is fear all around. It is nighttime and Peter had been there with Jesus when a crowd was sent by the Sanhedrin to capture and arrest Jesus (Matt 26:47–56).

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<sup>2</sup> Olivia Guy-Evans, "Fight, Flight, Freeze or Fawn: How We Respond to Threats," *Simply Psychology*, last modified November 9, 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/fight-flight-freeze-fawn.html>.

Luke tells us that the crowd was made up of Roman soldiers and the temple police, as well as representatives of the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:52). The Jewish leadership had failed to silence Jesus or stop him. Jesus was becoming too powerful and too popular. He could not be controlled. He was challenging their authority, and they feared the loss of power and influence. In their ignorance, they feared Jesus's teaching. So this crowd comes armed with swords and clubs and violence in their hearts. Judas comes boldly to identify Jesus, betraying him with a kiss. The kiss seemingly unnecessary because everyone knows who Jesus is, but how else would Judas earn his money? He was afraid of being poor and insignificant.

And then there is Peter. Peter had walked with Jesus for three years. He had even been a part of Jesus's inner circle. He loved Jesus and had just pledged to give his life for Jesus. And here is this crowd coming to take Jesus away. What would happen to Jesus and what would happen to him? As members of the crowd go to grab and arrest Jesus, Peter's adrenaline starts going and his epinephrine kicks into overdrive. His biological, unconscious acute stress response turns on and before we know it, Peter is ready to fight! He grabs his sword and slices off the ear of the slave of the high priest. The other disciples may stand around helpless, but Peter is not going to let them just take Jesus like that. Jesus says, "No, Peter, in the face of fear, don't fight!" Jesus admonishes Peter while healing the man's ear. And Jesus announces that if he wanted to, he could call upon his Father and twelve legions of angels, 72,000 angels, would come to his rescue. But he won't because that is not God's plan. Peter is no doubt disappointed and probably a little embarrassed. And as the crowd descends on Jesus and Jesus is arrested and taken to Caiaphas, the high priest, and the scribes and elders, the other disciples' acute stress responses kick in as well and they flee. In the face of fear and challenge, Jesus's disciples fight or flee.

But there is another way. And what I love about Peter as a disciple is that he is so dynamic. He's so real; he's so raw. He's so human. He's so like us. Imperfect, but trying. Initially Peter fights, and perhaps he did flee once Jesus was arrested (the Bible says that all of the disciples deserted Jesus and fled) but another instinct kicks in in Peter. Biology caught him when he tried to fight and perhaps his emotions got the best of him when he decided to flee, but his relationship with Jesus grabbed hold of him and reminded him of another way—to follow.

In the face of fear, when Peter remembered who he was and whose he was, Peter remembered to follow. The Bible says, "But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and

going inside he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end” (Matt 26:58). Peter remembered that there was another way, and that way was to follow Jesus. It’s the way of all of us who seek to be faithful.

Martin Luther King knew the way was to follow Jesus as well. In the face of fire hoses, dogs, clubs, insults, and arrests he maintained an ethic of nonviolence, not because his inclination wasn’t to retaliate but because he knew that for God’s solution to prevail God’s methods needed to be employed. With Eugene “Bull” Connor, George Wallace, and the weight of city and state governments pressing down on him, King knew that physical fighting could not be his option. “Not by might, nor by power, but by God’s Spirit” would freedom triumph in the face of fear and evil (Zech 4:6). Fleeing was not an option—tempting though it may have been—to retreat to an over-spiritualized gospel or an “ostrich head in the sand” existence. After all, where could a Black person escape segregation in 1950s America? As a Christian, as a pastor, as a proclaimer of the gospel, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, he knew there was only one way—to follow. To follow Jesus.

Following Jesus is the unpopular way, the uncommon way, the hard way. Did you ever notice that when Jesus called the disciples he never asked them if they wanted to be his disciples? He didn’t ask their preference or solicit their opinions. Instead, he merely said, “Follow me.”<sup>3</sup> It is indeed an invitation, like “come over” but it is much more than that. It is an imperative, a declaration even. What is required of Jesus’s disciples? Follow Jesus. For those original twelve disciples, following Jesus meant following him to the temple or the mountains where he taught. Following him as he healed and cast out demons and restored people to dignity and community. Following him to dinner with sinners and as he took compassion on the poor and marginalized. Following him as he embraced small children. Following him as he refuted those who sought to test him. Following him to unfriendly territory like Samaria and the Gadarenes. Following him to mountaintops and gardens where he prayed. And, little did they know, it also meant following him to the cross.

Because following Christ is not a one-time command. From the very first “follow me,” Jesus’s command remains. Why? Because Jesus’s commands do not expire. From the first “follow me” to the reminders, time and time again the way remains the same. Follow me.

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<sup>3</sup> See Matt 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11; John 1:35–51.

“But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end.”

Following Jesus is about *direction*. Following Jesus is about following in the direction of Jesus. “But Peter was following him....” Following Jesus is more than a declaration. It is a determination, a new way of living and being in the world. It is not our natural inclination. Rather, it is a conscious decision to walk the narrow road, the uncommon route, the unpopular route. To obey Jesus. To love like Jesus. To have faith like Jesus. To forgive like Jesus. To care for the poor and oppressed like Jesus. To point the way to the Father like Jesus.

We’re in this room today because we have committed to following Jesus. The love of Christ has captured us and we have given Jesus our hearts. We have made the difficult decisions to conform our lives to the calling of Jesus Christ. He said, “Follow me,” and eventually—some sooner than others—we said yes. But I’ve often wondered in a country of Christian leaders, what direction are we really following?

Have you ever been to an amusement park and gone into the house of mirrors? There’s the real thing—maybe your child, your spouse, or a friend—but then there are mirror images of them all around the room. It’s disconcerting because you don’t know which one is the right one. And you start moving toward the one you think is the right one and before you know it, you’ve hit yourself up against a mirror. I think that sometimes when we are following Jesus there are so many images of who we think Jesus is that we can’t always tell the right one. We actually start following one that looks more like a mirror of us or the shadow side of us rather than the actual Jesus.

Judas was called a follower of Jesus Christ. He walked with Jesus and was taught by Jesus and, I imagine, even cast out demons and healed people as a disciple of Jesus. But he was following a distorted image of Jesus. Judas never understood that Jesus wasn’t here for money, for power, and for popularity. Jesus wasn’t here to take advantage and siphon money from the poor. Jesus wasn’t here to be the most loved rabbi. Jesus wasn’t here so that Judas could live his best life. So when it became obvious that he was following a Jesus that he had created, not the Jesus who was going to the cross, he tapped out. He didn’t believe in that Jesus. He was going in the wrong direction. Judas wanted a popular Jesus.

Peter was moving in the direction of Jesus. Peter spoke for the disciples, and I believe he spoke for many of us when he said, “We have left everything to follow you” (Mark 10:28). He would tell Jesus, “Lord, to whom

can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68–69). “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). But even Peter couldn’t imagine following a Jesus who demonstrated strength through weakness, who gave himself up to arrest, and spoke of dying on a cross. Peter wanted a powerful Jesus.

Too many of us think we are following Jesus when we’re actually following the Jesus who mirrors us, the Jesus we have created in our heads. I’ll admit it, I want a Jesus who hates the people who hate me. But that’s not Jesus. During King’s time, many southern white Christians wanted a segregated Jesus. That’s not Jesus. Christian nationalists want an American flag-waving, gun-toting, and Constitution-spouting Jesus. That’s not Jesus. Liberals want a fluffy, everything-goes, cookies-and-milk, rock-you-in-your-sins Jesus. That’s not Jesus. Moderates want a complacent, in the sweet-by-and-by, don’t-ruffle-the-feathers Jesus. That’s not Jesus. And I’m glad that our Jesus is not like that Jesus. I may not know everything about Jesus, but I know Jesus loves everyone. I know Jesus isn’t a US citizen. I know Jesus isn’t a Democrat or Republican. I know Jesus hates sin and is begging us to turn from our wicked ways and sin no more. I know that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, that no one comes to the Father but by him. And I know that Jesus isn’t complacent because if Jesus were complacent, we would still be in our sins. He knew we could not wait for the world to work itself out on its own. He would have to come, affirmatively, to save us. And this is why when Jesus came: “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19, NRSV). This is what it means to follow in the direction of Jesus.

To follow Jesus means that we cannot excise the prophetic witness of Jesus Christ from his mission of salvation. Jesus defends the cause of the oppressed. He defends women from public shaming. He heals people and brings them back into communal living. He gives dignity to the outsider by eating with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. He breaks down racial and gender barriers by revealing himself to a Samaritan woman. He offers opportunity for the rich to pay restitution and reparations. And if we want to be followers of Jesus Christ, we must go and do likewise.

Following Jesus isn’t an excuse not to act. A friend told me years ago that Christians pray a good game, meaning that we hide behind prayer as an excuse not to act. Jesus did both. He prayed and healed. He had compassion and he acted.

In what direction are our people following Jesus? In what direction are you following Jesus? Jesus calls us to follow him. We must follow him in the right direction.

Following Jesus is not just about direction, it's also about *distance*. How closely are we following Jesus? "But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest and going inside, he sat with the guards." All four of the Gospels tell us that Peter followed Jesus after he was arrested but the synoptic Gospels tell us that all the disciples first fled (presumably including Peter) and then Peter did not simply follow Jesus but followed from a distance. This is an interesting observation to make. Peter was there in the vicinity when Jesus is taken to the home of Caiaphas (unlike the other disciples), but he also placed distance between himself and Jesus. The Bible tells us that it was as far as the distance of the courtyard. We have no way of knowing how wide that was, but it was significant enough to record. Why would a follower of Jesus place distance between himself and Jesus? We know why. It's when we don't want to be affiliated with Jesus anymore. Peter gives it away later when he is recognized as a disciple of Jesus, but Peter denies it three times (Matt 26:69–75). I think Peter finally realizes who he was following and he has to make a choice. Will he continue to follow or not? Knowing where following Jesus will lead him, will he continue on? Peter had been following at the wrong distance.

Following Jesus means following him closely, and it means following him at all costs, at all times. But something happens when we follow Jesus closely—we are exposed. Peter's physical distance is emblematic of his heart distance. How closely are you following Jesus? Peter wasn't willing to go all the way with Jesus, not if it really cost him his life. Peter was a bit too prideful and a bit too self-righteous and a bit too concerned about his own self-preservation. Peter was a bit too inwardly focused. Peter lost sight of the mission. Fear took over. Peter's loyalty was now being tested and that same Peter who only hours before had declared with conviction, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you" is now distancing himself from Jesus (Matt 26:33). This same Peter who just moments ago was pulling out the sword and ready to fight on behalf of Jesus is now following from afar.

Peter wasn't as brave as he thought he was. He wasn't as dedicated to Jesus as he thought he was. Adrenaline can make you stronger than you think, but so can a group. It was easy to follow Jesus when you have ten other disciples around you. It's easy when you're not alone. It's easy when you're preaching to the choir and you can hear the "Amens" and see the



nods, but when the crowd is antagonistic and you are standing alone at the pulpit, at the dinner table, on the golf course, at the hair salon, it's much harder. We say that we won't deny Jesus, and honestly I don't think anyone in this room would deny the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I don't think we would give in to pluralism or Unitarianism or universalism. But I do think some of us would be challenged if we started talking about a Jesus who supports women preachers or pastors—not because Paul said it but because Jesus entrusted his first sermon to a woman to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen. Some of us might distance ourselves if we had to be honest about America's sins against the Native Americans, our First Nations brothers and sisters, whose land was ravaged, their culture decimated, their people left to die a slow death on reservations pumped with alcohol, drugs, gambling, and poverty, and who continue to be unseen and unheard. If we had to address the racism that still prevails in the boardrooms, the classrooms, and the sanctuaries. If we had to question our pastor friends vying for political power. If we had to do more than send thoughts and prayers when children are dying in mass school shootings. Because Jesus convicts us. Jesus challenges us. Jesus calls us to move outside of ourselves to see the other. Jesus forces us beyond compassion to action.

When we don't follow Jesus closely, we run the risk of getting lost. I remember being a little girl and going to the store with my mother. Before we even got in the store, my mother would tell me, "Stay close to me. Stay where I can see you. Stay where I can grab you." She primed me to pay attention to her, to stay close to her because she knew that when I stray too far away I can get lost. It's harder to see her. Other people would get in front of me and between us and I could lose sight of her altogether. If she were to go down an aisle, I could miss it. If she were to take the escalator, I might just pass by her, so I needed to stay close to her.

When we don't stay close to Jesus, we can lose sight of him and find our vision blocked by others. We fall back into the crowd. We know this. That's why many of us have been struggling with our congregations for the past eight years or so. Their vision has been blocked by outsiders—political pundits and social media talking heads. Every Sunday we contend with CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, IG, FB, TikTok, Joe Rogan, Charlamagne tha God, and anyone else with a phone camera. Many of our people have lost sight of Christ. Many of us have lost sight of Christ. Too many others have gotten in the way. We are following at too far of a distance. Peter ends up sitting with the guards. Their presence influences even the mighty, devoted Peter. There is wisdom in the words of

Psalm 1:1: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers.” Peter was now among the crowd and his courage is gone. Soon he will say, “I don’t know the man” (Matt 26:72).

If we’re not careful, the crowds will have us, too, behaving as if we don’t know the man. Our calls for care for the poor are deemed socialism. Our calls for racial justice and reconciliation are deemed “wokeism.” Our calls for gender equality are deemed destroying the traditional family structure. We are told we are being too political and it is not the realm of the church. But if God is sovereign, there is no aspect of our lives where the Word of God does not apply. Don’t let the crowds make you lose sight of Jesus!

You do know Jesus! You know the man from not just Galilee but Nazareth, from where no good can come. Not just Mary’s baby but the child of a teenage mother. Not just born in a manger but under threat of death by empire. Not just caring for widows but condemning a system that keeps widows in poverty. Don’t lose sight of Jesus. Stay close to him. Following Jesus is about distance.

Finally, following Jesus is not just about direction and distance but also *destination*. Following Jesus is about destination. “But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end.” Peter wanted to see what would happen. Now, would Jesus call down those 72,000 angels, or would he actually go to the cross like he said he would and what seems like is going to happen? I wonder at what point Peter thought, “I didn’t sign up for all of this. I just wanted to heal people and make people smile. I just wanted to follow the messiah we had been waiting for. I didn’t think it would come to this.” I wonder at what point you have thought, “I didn’t sign up for this. I just wanted to preach the gospel and baptize people and journey with them through life. I didn’t think it would mean I would have to resist injustice.”

Peter sat with the guards to see what would happen to Jesus, and by extension what could happen to him. Peter was focused on self-preservation. Peter didn’t want to be wrong and end up on the losing side. Merriam-Webster tells me that self-preservation is “the natural instinct to protect oneself from danger and harm.”<sup>4</sup> It’s a basic survival mechanism that’s common to all living things. Examples of this include jumping

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<sup>4</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “self-preservation,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-preservation>.

out of the way of a speeding car and fleeing a dangerous situation. The Cambridge Dictionary includes, get this, “abandoning friends to align with new rulers.”<sup>5</sup> Abandoning friends to align with new rulers! That’s what we see with Peter. In an effort to protect himself, he creates distance between himself and Jesus, he stands with the guards checking out how all of this will go down and eventually denies knowing Jesus. He’s aligning himself with new rulers. Peter is fawning. Peter saw what was happening and he began calculating the risk and he determined that the cost was too high. He knew, if he didn’t believe it before, that Jesus was going to the cross. And if Jesus was going, would he be next?

Peter knew how this would end and he didn’t like the ending. I imagine that it all began to come back to him and make sense to him. That conversation recorded in Matthew 16 began to rush to his memory. Jesus told them that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed. Peter had disagreed and told Jesus no, that this couldn’t happen to him. And after rebuking Peter, Jesus replied, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt 16:24-25). Now it all made sense. Following Jesus means a true commitment and the risk of death. There is no turning back. This wasn’t hyperbole. It wasn’t hypothetical. This was actually happening. Jesus was about to take up his cross, and if Peter was going to follow then Peter would have to deny himself and take up his own cross and follow Jesus. The choice must be made between self-preservation and following Jesus. And in this moment, Peter chose self-preservation. He saw where this was going. He saw the destination and saw it was the cross. He saw it was death. And he was not willing to go there.

King knew the destination and if he ever forgot he was quickly reminded. He was arrested over twenty times and put in jails run by openly racist officials. His home was shot into, bombed, and set on fire. He was stabbed. He received constant hate mail and death threats. The FBI sent him letters taunting him to kill himself. There was no question about his destination. It wasn’t whether it would happen but when. And yet there was a cause greater than himself, a calling greater than himself, a determination to follow someone other than himself, a commitment to follow Jesus that compelled him to deny himself, take up his cross, and

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<sup>5</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, “self-preservation,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/self-preservation>.

follow Jesus, knowing the destination. People—God’s people—needed to be free. Justice and righteousness needed to prevail. Jesus’s mandate to love needed to be worked out on the streets of Birmingham and in the jails in Montgomery and on the bridge to Selma and in the churches of Atlanta and New York and in the ghettos of Detroit and in the union halls in Memphis and even in the countryside of Vietnam. There was a calling, there was a mandate to follow Jesus. As he said, and I’m paraphrasing, “If a person has not discovered something that he or she will die for, that person is not fit to live.”<sup>6</sup> King was willing to die not for Black people but for Jesus. He was willing to die for the cause of Christ that took up the cause of the poor and the oppressed. He counted the cost and he was willing to pay it. He was just a pastor and a preacher. And at the end of the day, he had one job—to follow Jesus. And justice is where Jesus took him. Fellow pastors, preachers, chaplains, denominational leaders, at the end of the day you have one job—to follow Jesus! And, today, Jesus is calling you to justice. Jesus is calling you to that pressing issue bubbling up in your community. Are you willing to follow Jesus? Are you willing to follow Jesus even if it takes you to the cross?

King understood something that Peter understood later, after he had denied Christ and after he had been restored. The destination is not the cross. The destination was never the cross. The cross is a stopover to the ultimate destination. King says it this way,

Well, I don’t know what will happen now; we’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Land.<sup>7</sup>

King understood that the cross was not the destination. The cross is a destination, but it’s not the *final destination*. The cross was not the final destination for Jesus and it’s not the final destination for us.

Because when I go back and I read my Bible I am reminded that they took Jesus and they led him through a bogus, kangaroo court. They put

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Speech at Illinois Wesleyan University 1966,” Illinois Wesleyan University, <https://www.iwu.edu/mlk/>.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” AFSCME, <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>.

a purple robe on him to mock him. And they put a crown of thorns on his head. And they forced him to carry that cross up Golgotha's hill. And they put nails in his hands and nails in his feet. And they hoisted him up on that cross. And they crucified him between two thieves. And he died on that cross. They laid him in a borrowed tomb, and he stayed there all night Friday, and all Saturday morning, and all Saturday night. But on the third day, early, early, early Sunday morning he got up with all power in his hands. And he is now seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven.

When you remember the ultimate destination, when you remember that the cross is not the end, the earthly threat of suffering and death is put into perspective. We follow Jesus because Jesus conquered death and so will we. We follow Jesus because the life that we thought we lost, we will ultimately gain. "For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt 16:25).

The final destination is heaven. The final destination is everlasting life. The final destination is to hear the words "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21, KJV). Can you say it with me? I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.

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