

“Starting Again,” Acts 10:34-43, August 18, 2019, Brett Younger, Lake Shore Baptist Church

*Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—the one who is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how Jesus went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*

*We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put Jesus to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised Jesus on the third day and allowed Jesus to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with Jesus after the resurrection from the dead. Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that Jesus is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. About this one all the prophets testify that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ receives forgiveness of sins through Jesus’ name.”*

The Christian faith is not for people who are satisfied with the way things are. We get used to our bad habits. We do not quit doing things just because they are not worth doing. Quitting has a bad reputation.

Vince Lombardi growled, “Quitters never win and winners never quit.”

You will have to take my word for it. That is a spot-on Vince Lombardi impression.

Richard Nixon put it, “Defeat doesn’t finish a man, quitting does. A man isn’t finished when he’s defeated. He’s finished when he quits.”

Nixon said this right before he quit.

Steven Pearl lamented, “I phoned my dad to tell him I had stopped smoking. He called me a quitter.”

Quitting has gotten a bum rap, because quitting is a great idea. It is never too soon to quit. The Bible is in favor of quitting. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means to quit going one way and head the other.

Saint Paul writes: “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed. Get rid of all such things as anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language.”

We could paraphrase Paul, “Y’all have some serious quitting to do.”

I quit some things when we came to Lake Shore. I quit being young for my job. I quit being underweight. I quit being careful in the pulpit. I quit thinking I could be the smartest person in the room. I quit thinking I could be the best Christian in the room.

There are other things I should quit. I should quit skipping breakfast. Quit eating pizza before I get to three slices. Quit checking e-mail every time my phone vibrates. Quit overestimating the importance of people who complain. Quit underestimating the importance of people who do not complain. Quit comparing every church to Lake Shore. Quit wishing I was taller, thinner, and richer.

You have gotten used to some things that you should not have gotten used to. These are things you should quit. Quit putting extra sugar in your tea. Quit bingeing TV shows that make you stupid. Quit following Twitter threads that make you dull. Quit talking about people you should be talking to. Quit hanging on to the grudge you have been dragging around for years. Quit counting your money.

Quit cheating on your taxes. Quit being so hard on others. Quit being so hard on yourself. Quit dividing people into winners and losers. Quit believing you deserve everything you have. Quit wanting more. Quit feeling trapped in what you have always done. Quit complaining about things you are not willing to work to fix. Quit thinking the problems of the world are not your responsibility. Quit putting off making new friends. Quit being afraid of anything that is new.

An interim is a good time for church people to quit. Quit being late for Sunday school. Quit drinking out of someone else's coffee mug. Quit cheating on your offering.

Quit wishing everyone would think about church just like you do. Quit focusing on the things on which you disagree. Quit measuring people by how long they have been here. Quit trying to figure out who gives the most money. Quit thinking about how the church was better or worse ten years ago. Quit thinking in terms of us and them.

The good news of the Christian faith is that we are not stuck in the old ways. Christianity is for people who want to quit.

Simon Peter wanted to quit. If he had not been dissatisfied with the way things were, then we would never have heard of him. Simon is a fisherman who lives with his wife in Capernaum. They share a house with his mother-in-law and his brother Andrew.

Fishing is not the worst occupation, but there are mornings when Simon wishes his boat had sunk during the night. The nets are always tangled. Simon smells like tuna and his brother smells like sardines. He is sick of sushi and there are only so many ways to filet a fish. Simon has nightmares about tilapia.

It is on one of those days that Simon hears Jesus say, "So you're Simon. I'm going to call you Peter, the Rock."

Jesus is the excuse to quit that Peter has been waiting, hoping, and praying for.

Jesus says, "You should follow me. Quit fishing. From here on out, people should be your business."

Peter drops his nets and gets on a first century rollercoaster. For three years Peter follows Jesus up and down and around curves he had never imagined.

There are high points like the time Jesus responds to something Peter says with the only beatitude he ever made up for a single person: “Blessed are you, Simon. Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. Upon this rock I’ll build my church.”

There are low points, like five minutes later when Jesus tells Peter, “Get behind me, Satan. You’re a stumbling block.”

Peter says the wrong things, asks the wrong questions, and gets the wrong ideas, but he loves the ride. There is the time that Jesus is walking on the water. Peter gets out of the boat and tries it for himself, but rocks do not float. Jesus has to play lifeguard and fish him out.

Peter is never sure where they are headed, but every day is exciting. Jesus preaches, provokes, consoles, and infuriates. Peter blunders, fails, misconstrues, and misunderstands, but he loves the life that Jesus brings.

Peter does not look back, until the end. On the night before the cross, Peter promises that he will lay down his life for Jesus, but after Jesus is arrested, Peter claims three times that he does not even know him. The world comes to an end. Think of the best person you know—the strongest, brightest, greatest soul you know—then multiply that person’s life ten times. That is Jesus. At little more than thirty, he is destroyed, and made horribly dead by the cruelest of means. Tears run down Peter’s face like rain running off a rock.

And then, on Easter Sunday morning, God gives Peter a new start. Jesus tells Peter to feed his sheep—and Peter does it. On Pentecost the wind of the Spirit blows and Peter preaches, “God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.”

Given a new start, Peter stands up to the same power brokers that condemned Jesus saying, “We cannot keep from speaking about what we’ve seen and heard.”

Then this Jewish fisherman visits the home of a Roman centurion, an officer of the occupying army. Cornelius wants to join the church. The old law-abiding Peter would have sent the question to the board of deacons, but he has caught the joy of what God is doing and of what the church is supposed to be.

Peter explodes with the good news: “The Gospel is for everybody. God plays no favorites. It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from. If you want God to give you a new start, it’s yours. The Spirit draws the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, sinners. You know what happened in Judea. Jesus went through the countryside telling everyone that God offers a new way of life.”

Peter slows down as he says, “But the religious authorities liked the old way, so they hung him on a cross, but God brought him back to tell those who would listen God’s good news. Jesus broke bread and drank the wine of new life. Before long, our lives opened up like that tomb and flowed with fresh passion and new purpose. Folks who’d been shut up in fear broke free into fierce new courage. People closed up in guilt emerged not ashamed any more. People sealed up in sadness stepped into the light laughing, singing, and hugging one another.

God brings new life to you, to me, to the church, to all of us. We can start again.”

By the grace of God, you and I can start again. The good news of the gospel is that we can begin something new. Starting, unlike quitting, has a great reputation. Everybody loves the idea of beginning again.

Carl Bard understands the goodness of starting over, “Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky writes, “Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another.”

Mick Jagger paraphrases Dostoevsky, “If you start me up, if you start me up, I’ll never stop, so start me up.”

The Bible is about starting over. Isaiah writes, “Forget about what’s happened; don’t keep going over old history. Be alert. Be present. I’m about to do something brand-new. It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it?”

The Psalmist invites us to “Sing to God a brand new song.”

The hope of faith is getting to start again and again. I started some things when we came to Lake Shore. I started drinking coffee. I started wearing a dress every Sunday—a practice I have continued to this day. I started looking forward to Sunday school. I started loving the church for what it is and not just for what it could be.

It is never too late to start. That is why we are here. Church is where you start again. We believe in the magic of beginnings. Christians love the blank composition book, the empty room, and the first kiss. God is always inviting us to begin and start a more remarkable journey. This day, like every day, can be a beginning.

This new day is here, like a chapter in a book, waiting to be written. The world is open before us. We can aim higher. We can write a different story.

An interim is a good time for church people to start. Start being more grateful for the good people in your Sunday school class. Start learning the names of everyone at church. Start imagining new ways to be the church. Start noticing the things on which you agree. Start looking at things in different ways. Start thinking in terms that include everyone. Start listening more carefully for God’s voice. Start dreaming the church that God dreams.

We can start again right here and now. Look inside and figure out what needs to change. Ask yourself: What needs to happen? What mistakes do you want to move past? What little things could you do without? What big things do you overlook? What might God want you to do? Who can you help? Who do you need to love more?

How can you take faith more seriously? More joyfully? Are you willing to let go of what does not matter to make room for what does? Are you willing to sacrifice what you are now for what you can become?

With God's help, we can start with a clean slate. Grace is a great big "do-over." I should start trying new things. Start seeing new visions. Start dreaming new dreams. Start letting go of old ideas. Start opening my eyes to new ideas.

Start eating more salads. Start kissing Carol goodbye every morning. Start calling my mother every Sunday. Start noticing the trees. Start reading more poetry. Start reading the Bible as much as I read books about the Bible. Start praying every morning. Start telling people how delightful they are. Start believing in starting again.

You need to start looking for good things to start. Start breathing deeply. Start appreciating little things you have never noticed. Start turning off your phone. Start exercising. Start keeping a journal. Start drinking decaf after noon. Start listening to someone else's music. Start calling your mother-in-law. Start telling more people more often that you love them.

Start speaking to your neighbors. Start asking co-workers if they have a church family. Start exploding with good news. Start playing lifeguard. Start feeding the hungry. Start looking poor people in the eye. Start giving others the freedom to start again.

Start thinking deeply. Start asking questions. Start singing louder. Start listening to the Spirit. Start laughing. Start celebrating. Start living the life God wants you to live. The good news of the Christian faith is that we can start again.