I’ve preached a lot of sermons. This is number 395, to be exact. Not all of them have been here at Crestwood, although it may feel that way to you. Now, in those previous 394 sermons, there were a lot of bad ones, I mean real clunkers. I’ve had people fall asleep during my sermons, I’ve had people get up and walk out, and I’ve had plenty of people argue with me in the receiving line after worship. But I’ve never had anyone try to throw me off a cliff. Yet. There’s a good reason I didn’t take a church in Colorado.

That sounds preposterous, right? To want to throw someone off a cliff for what they said? Yet that’s exactly what happens to Jesus in this story, and the perpetrators are the people he grew up with. Jesus really knows how to make enemies fast! Just a few weeks ago, wasn’t he the cute little baby making cooing sounds in the manger? How did we go from, “Aw, he’s adorable!” to “Get him!”?

This story we have today is the first event in Jesus’ public ministry. Right before this passage, Jesus is baptized and then goes out into the wilderness for 40 days, where he is tempted by Satan. Now he has returned to start his work, and Luke tells us he’s beginning to get a reputation. As he taught and healed in places like Capernaum, “a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.”

Now, it’s time for him to go to Nazareth and preach his first sermon in his hometown synagogue. I remember the very first sermon I ever preached, which I’m 117% sure was one of those clunkers I mentioned. It was in my home church in Jeffersonville. The sermon was on the prophet Jonah, but other than that I don’t remember a thing about it. I was so nervous, preaching in front of my church family, that I would have gladly thrown myself off a cliff rather than step into the pulpit.

But Jesus had no reason to be nervous, because he was coming into town as a minor celebrity. The local paper probably proclaimed, “Hometown Hero Returns: Jesus, Son of Joseph, to Appear in Synagogue.” The locals want to see for themselves what Joseph’s little boy had been up to, maybe tweak his cheek and ruffle his hair. Out in the world he may be the Messiah, but back home in Nazareth, Jesus is still Joseph’s boy. In the people’s minds, Jesus was who they thought he was, not who he had become.

Being an observant Jew, Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath to worship. As far as we know, worship services back then were simple. You opened by offering prayer, then read scripture, then had a sermon. These duties could be performed by anyone present, so it’s not unusual that Jesus was the one who read the passage for the day.

The passage itself wasn’t out of the ordinary – a selection from the prophet Isaiah – but what Jesus said afterward is worth noting. Luke tells us that after Jesus read the passage, the people leaned forward in their chairs to see what he had to say. This is it, his first sermon in his hometown! And here’s what he says: “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” That’s it? And Luke says the people were amazed, because never in their wildest dreams did they think a preacher could give such a short sermon.

OK, that’s probably not what amazed them. What amazed them was that Jesus was taking the words from prophet Isaiah and applying them to himself. The passage he chooses is from a section of Isaiah that promised deliverance for the Israelites: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” Right away Jesus is making a statement about who he is. The word “Messiah” means “anointed one,” so Jesus is basically saying he is the One who has been anointed to do these things: to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, the year of Jubilee, when all debts would be forgiven. That’s quite a mission statement, and Jesus is claiming, right there in front of his former Sunday School teachers and nursery attendants, that his presence means this prophecy has been fulfilled.

Luke tells us the audience was amazed at Jesus’ gracious words and wondered, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” In other words, “Really?” The little guy who used to crawl under the pews and sing in the children’s choir? Is he saying that he’s the fulfillment of this scripture? He’s the son of Joseph, not the son of God! In the people’s minds, Jesus was who they thought he was, not who he had become.

Jesus is no dummy; he knows that people are skeptical about what they’ve heard. Rumor is he’s healed people, touched lepers, cured incurable sicknesses. The people of Nazareth wanted more than words; they wanted proof. Jesus says, “You’re probably waiting for some magic trick, aren’t you? You’ve heard what I’ve done in Capernaum and now you want the hometown discount, you want a dog and pony show to prove I am who I say I am.”

But Jesus fails to live up to expectations. Instead of giving them proof, he gives them a tongue-lashing. He compares his audience to the Israelites who lived during the nation’s least religious period, during the time of Elijah and Elisha. He points out to them that during that time, God didn’t go to the Israelites to provide healing and comfort. He went to a Gentile widow in Sidon and a foreign army general in Syria.

The implication is clear. You remember all those promises in the passage from Isaiah? Freedom, release, good news? Jesus is saying, “Those aren’t for you. They are for someone else, someone outside of the fold, someone you probably don’t even like.” Why? Because the people refuse to see Jesus for who he has become. Many of us are in the same boat. We could sail around the world, cure cancer, and win an Oscar, but back home we’re still little Tommy or little Susie. As my mother used to tell me, “You’ll never be too big to spank!” Jesus will always be Joseph’s son to them. They don’t give their understanding of him any room to grow. In the people’s minds, Jesus was who they thought he was, not who he had become.

Guilty. I’ve done that. I’ve encased Jesus in a certain persona, thinking of him in only one certain way, pigeonholing him as my personal savior and forgetting he’s other people’s savior, too, even for people who I don’t believe deserve a savior. I’ve tried to hold onto him in a white-knuckled grip, refusing to let my perception of him move beyond my own carefully defined theology. I want Jesus to be my spiritual ATM, doling out grace and forgiveness whenever I ask for it. But I sure don’t want him doing the same for other people who aren’t nearly as worthy of it as me! It sounds pious to say we believe in grace for everyone, but in reality a lot of us probably believe in grace for “us” and judgment for “them.” And when Jesus tells his hometown people that God is going to use him to rescue the wrong people, they’d rather kill him than let him go through with it. But go through he does, passing through the midst of them and going on his way.

This event, right at the beginning of Luke, is a microcosm of the whole gospel: it tells us who Jesus is, what his ministry is all about, and how people will react to him. Seeing Jesus dead will be a recurring theme among his opponents, and they’ll finally get their way on Golgotha, as Jesus hangs from the cross. But we know that the Jesus who passes through the midst of crowds
also rolls away stones. No matter how much we want to keep him for ourselves, this guy is just impossible to pin down.

What would happen if we released him? After all, that’s what Jesus was preaching. I think of police dogs who are trained to latch onto a criminal with their jaws until they hear the command to “release!” That’s what Jesus is saying in this passage: “Release!” It may initially sound like those needing release are the destitute among us: the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed. And that’s true. But the only way they can be released is if the Christ-followers in this world work to make it happen. And to do that, we may need to be released ourselves.

What might we need to be released from? What holds us back from fulfilling this mission Jesus has given us? We might need to be released from the fact that God has called us to work on behalf of those so unlike us. We might need to be released from our belief that the problems of the world are someone else’s responsibility. We might need to be released from the “us vs. them” mentality which seems to dominate so much of our discourse. There is a lot wrong with this world, and following Jesus’ mission statement here in Luke would help us make a difference in changing things. But the way to start fixing what is wrong with our world is to start fixing ourselves. What might we need to be released from in order to help others – the imprisoned, the poor, the oppressed – experience the Lord’s favor?

Jesus moves on from Nazareth to begin fulfilling this mission, a mission that will ultimately lead him to the cross. It probably would have been safer just to stay where he was, not make any noise, live with his head down and let God sort it out. It would have been easier to stay the person that people thought he was, rather than become the person God created him to be. God has created each of us that way, with the potential to become so much more than we are. And the beautiful thing about being followers of God is that as we help release others – the poor, the imprisoned, the oppressed – we ourselves grow beyond who we are, becoming the people God intends us to be. May that singular commitment to be more like Jesus tomorrow than we are today be our mission in life. Release!