

27 March 2016 (Easter)

Resurrected Community

John 21:1-17

Most of the resurrection appearances of Jesus in the Gospels faithfully record the completely understandable shock and surprise of those who witness the risen Christ. Our reading today is a little different. It is, John tells us, the third time Christ appears to his disciples, enough time to move past amazement. We read John 21, verses 1-17.

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

Some background to this encounter. Last week, as I reflected on Jesus alone in the Garden in Gethsemane, I pointed out that every vital faith has to be able to stand alone. There, Jesus faced his deepest fears, struggled to maintain his trust that God really was in control, and he *had* to do it alone. As wonderful as an entourage is, as great as it is to have friends and supporters, faith has to be able to find courage without a peer group propping it up. Jesus did find courage, and he prayed, "Your will, not mine, be done." Well, just hours after Jesus affirmed his independent faith in God, the apostle Peter had a chance to do the same. It didn't work out so well. After Jesus was arrested by the temple guards, Peter followed quietly, hoping to stay close without being

taken himself. But he had been with Jesus too much, and people were bound to recognize him. As he sat around a charcoal fire that long night, three different people asked if he wasn't one of Jesus' followers, and three times Peter emphatically denied it. Sometimes we stand alone and discover faith. Other times we stand alone and discover how frightened we are. That's the background to today's story.

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Now the Easter sermon. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Once again we gather on this holiest of Holy Days, and once again I wonder what I'm supposed to say up here once I've affirmed that Christ *is* risen. That's the message today, and if you just remember one thing, that's it. But don't go home yet. As usual, I feel as if I should expand on it somehow. For several years it was the fashion to preach Easter sermons that laid out logical and historical proofs of the Resurrection. But that's useless. None of those proofs ever changed anyone's mind. They're like every political statement on Facebook: all they do is make people who already agree with you feel smug. So this year I don't want to deal with the question of *whether* – you're here because you already believe – but instead ask the question *why*? Why did Jesus rise from the dead?

The usual answer is that Jesus died on the cross to cleanse us from our sins and rose again to break the power of death. This is how we are “saved unto eternal life” through the work that Christ did on the cross and on the Third Day. All right. I accept that. It's in the Bible. But it's not as simple as we make it sound. How did that work? Why did Jesus have to die for us to be forgiven? And how does his rising from the dead somehow make that possible for us? I'm not going to answer those questions now, though. This is more in the way of a promotion for my next sermon series, on the Book of Hebrews, where I will be touching on some of these questions. All I want to do now is acknowledge that just saying Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave to save us from our sins and give us eternal life doesn't resolve every question.

And there seems to be more going on, anyway. That formulation describes the effect of the Resurrection in future terms. Because Christ died and rose again, our sins will be forgiven and we will enter eternal life after we die. But the actual accounts of his Resurrection appearances, don't talk about someday. Every time he appears to someone, he eventually gets around to “Here's what I want you to do now”: *Go tell the others, Meet me in Galilee, Go, therefore, to all the world* . . . Look, for instance, at his encounter with Peter as they eat breakfast over a charcoal fire:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord. You know I love you.”

“Good. Feed my lambs.” Then Jesus asks again, “Simon, son of John? Do you love me?”

“Lord, you *know* that I love you!”

“That's good. Tend my sheep.” Another long pause. Then, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Lord, why are you asking this? You know everything. You *know* I do!”

“Good. Feed my sheep.”

Two things to note about this. First of all, as you may have noticed already, this is Peter's redemption for the time when he sat at a different charcoal fire and three times denied that he knew Jesus. By giving him an opportunity to affirm his love three times, Jesus was intentionally restoring his relationship with his friend. Not someday, not after Peter dies, but now. This isn't about Peter getting to enter eternal life eventually. This is about healing a friendship today.

And the other thing to note is that it's about community. Peter isn't just restored as an individual in relationship to Christ, but he is sent out to care for a new thing: a community of people in relationship with Christ, people caring for each other and serving the world. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Our doctrine teaches us that Jesus' resurrection changed eternity. That's good. But the Risen Christ on earth was dedicated to changing the world now, by establishing . . . us.

All through Lent I talked about things that the church as a whole has screwed up, and tried to make some suggestions on how we could turn that history around, at least in our own congregation. That's probably been something of a downer, to come to worship every week and hear a sermon on one more reason that people have given up on the church. As I've read story after story of people who had left the church, feeling that the institution was broken beyond repair, you've probably wished I would give it a rest. Well, I'm not going to apologize. It was Lent, after all: you weren't supposed to be happy. More to the point, we *do* need to examine ourselves honestly sometimes.

But today, at the end of the long mournful Lenten season, I have good news. Jesus Christ himself established the church. He didn't leave behind a body of laws. He didn't establish a holy shrine. He didn't appoint a bureaucracy. What Jesus left behind was a community of people. That community has taken as many different shapes as the cultures in which it has existed, and it will look very different in fifty years than it looks now, but the essence of the church has always been the gathering of people in restored relationship to Christ and each other. By God, the church is not broken. Parts maybe haven't functioned properly lately – you know how parts always break down – but they can be restored. And they will be. Two weeks ago I talked about people who were frustrated with the church's bureaucracy. Well, I am, too. We could do better than this. But do I think that a muddled, bloated, self-serving bureaucracy will destroy Christ's church? Don't be silly.

We're still here. Despite all that anyone else could do to us, and despite all the much worse things that we've done to ourselves, we're still here. A group of stumbling people who are daily being restored to relationship with the Risen Christ. In fact, although it's still not going to convince anyone, this is the number one proof that Christ is Risen: the fact that we're still here, feeding his lambs, tending his sheep. And we aren't going away.

Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed.