

Easter 2C

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

April 18, 2010

Acts 9:1-6 [7-20] Psalm 30 Revelation 5:11-14 ***John 21:1-19***

Back in college I took a New Testament survey course. One of the questions on the final exam was: *If you could only have one book from the New Testament which one would it be and why?*

I responded that my choice would be the gospel of John. I believe that John provides the most balanced view of Jesus as both God and man.

But I think I have an idea for a good extra-credit question: *If you could only have one story from the gospel of John about Jesus' time on earth, which story would you choose?*

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that today's gospel reading is the *single* story in all of the gospels that shows us the fullness of the meaning – for you, as we say when giving the bread and wine of Communion – of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This story even tells the implications for our lives as forgiven and redeemed sinner. It tells us how we, as followers of Christ, are to live our own lives. Let me explain why.

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Remember the story of the Last Supper? Peter had a leading roll in the story then, when he expressed his whole-hearted commitment to Jesus humbled himself to perform the task of a servant, when Jesus washed Peter's feet. Later that evening, Peter expressed his undying devotion to the Lord. He began by asking, "Lord, where are you going?" And Jesus answered him, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." In his exuberance, Peter responded, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." But Jesus answered him, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times."

And, indeed, the last we'd heard of Peter up until today's text was three chapters ago. He had followed as Jesus was taken from the Garden of Gethsemane to the high priest. Peter hung around outside, afraid to go in when Jesus was questioned. What was the last we'd heard of Peter? That he had faced his own questioning while lurking outside. That he had denied Jesus – not once, but three times.

But thankfully, that's not the end of the story. If the last we had heard of Peter was that he had denied his Lord and Savior, Peter would have been a mere footnote in history, perhaps ranking only slightly lower in the Rogue's Gallery than Judas. As we noted last week, if that was the last we'd ever heard of Peter, he would have forever been known as "Denying Peter." Instead, Jesus had another plan for Peter, as we heard in today's Gospel reading. We might think of today's story as "The Redemption of Peter."

Today's reading is Jesus' fourth post-resurrection appearance recorded in the gospel of John. The first appearance was to Mary Magdalene; the other two to the disciples in the Upper Room.

This time, Jesus appeared to Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two other disciples. But the other disciples are mere background in this story. This story mainly has to do with the relationship between Jesus and Peter.

Let's look at where today's story begins... I can just imagine the setup... The disciples have twice encountered the risen Jesus, but they're still not sure what they're supposed to do next. Peter says to the others: “Hey, you know, we used to be fishermen before we started following Jesus. Why don't we go out and see if we can still fish? After all, we've got to have some sort of fallback career, now that this disciple thing hasn't ended the way we thought it would. Let's go see if we've still got the hang of it.”

So Peter and six other disciples go out to the lake and take out a boat. It's not going well. I can just see impatient Peter getting more and more frustrated as the hours pass without a single fish brought up in the nets.

Then, off in the distance, they see a man on the shore. “Hey!” the man says, “Caught much yet?”

Peter responds, “Not a blessed thing!”

So the man replies, “Well, why don't you try putting your nets down on the other side of the boat?”

“Yeah, right!” Peter mutters to himself. “What is this guy, some sort of wise guy?”

One of the other disciples says, “Well, 'ya know, Peter, this hasn't been working out... what could it possibly hurt to do what he says? Maybe it's some new technique we missed out on while we took our three-year sabbatical from fishing?”

So, Peter relents and they drop the nets on the right side of the boat. And immediately, there were so many fish in the nets they were too heavy to haul in the boat. It was the Beloved Disciple who, because of this sign, recognized the man on shore: “It is the Lord!” he says.

The disciples then go ashore, only to find that Jesus has started a fire and spread a meal for them. After they had eaten, Jesus begins to question Peter. Why does Jesus speak to Peter, and not, perhaps, the “Beloved Disciple”? I think Jesus spoke specifically to Peter because it was Peter who was most in need of reconciliation with Jesus.

Jesus asks Peter *three times* if Peter loves him. And three times, Peter responds, “Of course I do.” You can almost sense, by the time Jesus asks for the third time, how hurt Peter is that Jesus would ask him, three times, if he loves him.

And yet, it was necessary that Jesus ask three times. These three questions about Peter’s love for Jesus counterbalance the three times Peter denied Jesus. It is a cosmic un-doing of Peter's denials, each dealt with, one at a time.

After each question and response, Jesus gives Peter a charge: “Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep.” Jesus calls Peter to respond to Jesus' love for him by loving his flock as Jesus has loved them.

THIS is what the life of the forgiven and redeemed sinner is supposed to be about. Being freed from our burden of sin and guilt, we are freed to love and care for each other, just as Jesus has loved and cared for us.

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So in this single story, we can see the fullness of the gospel message. The disciples have an encounter with the risen, victorious conqueror of sin and death. Jesus spreads a meal for the disciples. Jesus forgives Peter for his denials.

We all experience the fullness of the gospel told in this story. Through our baptism into Christ, we are given assurance that sin and death will not be the last words in our lives. We regularly have an encounter with our risen Lord when he feeds us in Holy Communion. We receive forgiveness and salvation.

But what's more, Jesus leaves Peter – and us – with a charge. We are told what to do with the forgiven and redeemed Christian life. We are told how to live as those who have been reconciled to God. We are told to show our love for Jesus by tending to the needs of all of God's children.

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This seems a fitting lesson as we begin our annual stewardship of time and talents. As we heard when we studied the readings from First Corinthians back in January, God grants each of us spiritual gifts for a purpose. Some have the gift of service, some the gift of compassion, some the gift of hospitality. These are but a few of the whole host of gifts that God grants to the faithful. Each of these gifts is granted for the building up of the body of Christ – not only to support the mission of the Church within these walls, but for us to carry the Gospel outside of this building and into the world.

For the next few Sundays we'll be hearing Temple Talks near the end of our worship services regarding how you can put your spiritual gifts to work, and how important those gifts are to us and to the world. I hope as you listen to these talks that you'll keep in mind the charge from Jesus to “Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep.”

Amen.

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