

Two Trials

Third Sunday of Easter

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Chesterfield, VA

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN.

John 21:1-19 (NRSV)

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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 sea. ⁸ 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. ⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² 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. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that

Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. ¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ 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.” ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

You probably know that the lectionary runs in a three-year cycle: Years A, B, and C. In Year A the gospel reading is from Matthew, B is Mark, and C is Luke. But in all three years, during Easter and up through Trinity Sunday, our gospel readings are from John.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the “synoptic” gospels, meaning they give more or less the same narrative of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection. John’s gospel is very different from them in both its language and the way it tells Jesus’ story. For one thing, in the synoptics Jesus deals with his disciples as a group. He teaches them as a group, he sends them out as a group, and so forth. In John’s gospel, the focus is much more on individual disciples. For this reason it’s particularly useful to us as we examine our personal individual relationship with Jesus. So let’s see what this morning’s gospel has to say to us.

In this morning’s reading, seven disciples encounter Jesus alive from the dead. Five of them we know: Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Two are not named. John refers to himself as one of the “sons of Zebedee,” or “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” but never in the first person. But as he writes this final chapter of his gospel he’s very focused on Peter and Peter’s relationship with Jesus.

Instead of Jerusalem, the disciples are in Galilee, where they’ve been told by an angel to go to meet the risen Jesus. He’s already appeared to them twice

in Jerusalem. While they're in their home territory waiting for Jesus, Peter decides to do what he knows best. He goes fishing. He and his companions fish all night with no results. As the day dawns, a figure on the shore advises them to **“Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.”** Suddenly the tedious hours of futile night fishing are interrupted by craziness. The nets are filled with so many huge fish they can't be hauled in, John exclaims, **“It is the Lord!”** and Peter jumps overboard and swims to Jesus.

They count out the fish and have breakfast with Jesus around the charcoal fire he has made. They're all sheepish about talking to him because the last time they had seen him was in the garden of Gethsemane. They had all deserted him before he died his horrible death by crucifixion.

And then Jesus takes Peter aside and puts him on trial. This is the second of two trials Peter faces in the gospel of John. The first gets set up at the last supper in chapter 13. At the supper, after he washes their feet, Jesus tells his disciples that he's only going to be with them a little while longer and that where he's going they can't come. Peter is upset. He says, **“Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”** Jesus says, in effect, “Really? Before the rooster crows you will have denied me three times.” A little later, in the high priest's courtyard, Peter faces his first trial. As he warms himself by another charcoal fire, three different questioners ask him in different ways if he's connected with Jesus. We just read the second trial, where Jesus asks him three times, **“Do you love me?”**

In both trials, the same question is repeated three times. In the first, the question is, “Aren't you with Jesus?” Peter answers with an emphatic **“No!”** In the second, it's **“Do you love me?”** and Peter answers sheepishly, **“Yes, Lord.”**

What happened to Peter between these two trials? In the first, like all the disciples, he's scared to death for what's going to happen to Jesus after he's arrested. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, had significant power over Jewish people in Jerusalem. And of course everybody knew what could happen to you when you fell into the meat grinder of the Roman so-called justice system. So as Peter stands by that first charcoal fire and is asked not once or twice but three times if he's with Jesus, he adamantly swears, “No way, Jose!” The cock crows, and suddenly Peter is overwhelmed with shame and grief. In spite of his ironclad determination to follow Jesus to the death, he has betrayed him.

But before Peter's second trial by the Sea of Galilee, he has seen Jesus' empty tomb, and seen Jesus himself alive from the dead not once, but twice.

Peter knows Jesus has gone through a horrible death and come out of the tomb gloriously alive. But the reality of Peter's shameful denial of Jesus is still with him. He's consumed with guilt and grief.

But Jesus doesn't comfort him. And he doesn't accuse him. Instead, he predicts for Peter what Peter himself had promised to do at his first trial in the high priest's courtyard: **"Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."** (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, **"Follow me."**

Tradition has it that Peter was crucified under Nero's persecutions. Because he felt unworthy to die like his Lord, he asked to be crucified head downward—upside down. What Peter promised and what Jesus predicted happened.

But to understand how Peter was able to make good on his rash promise to follow Jesus to the death, we need to go to Peter's life after this morning's appearance of the risen Jesus. You'll recall that Peter and the other disciples spent time with Jesus after his resurrection. Forty days later he ascended into heaven, as Luke says, **"after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen."** (Acts 1:2) Ten days after that, Jesus baptized them all in the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. So Peter, whose whole being had been overcome with the shame of having denied his Lord, was converted into a fearless witness for Jesus and leader of his disciples. We heard one example of Peter's fearless leadership in last week's reading from Acts: **"When the temple police had brought the apostles, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.'"**

In his later life, Peter wrote two letters to Christians. In the first, he urges his readers in Asia Minor to look to Jesus' own suffering as they experience

the cruel persecution of the Roman Empire. He tells them, **“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.”** (1 Peter 4:12-13 NRSV) As we think about Peter’s experiences before and after Jesus’ resurrection, we can see what he means. At the first charcoal fire, when he denied Jesus three times, Peter was very understandably afraid of being associated with him. He knew he ran the very real risk of the authorities finding him guilty by association with Jesus, so that he would suffer the same fate that Jesus did. He denied Jesus to save himself from suffering and death.

But after Jesus rose from the dead and Peter saw him the third time by the second charcoal fire, he can only feel sheepish and deeply ashamed. When Jesus repeats the question, **“Do you love me?”** Peter is filled with shame and anxiety because of his denials. But Jesus gives him his ministry assignment, to **“Feed my sheep”** and predicts that Peter himself will undergo the same kind of horrible suffering and death as Jesus.

What can we learn from all this? First, the fact that Jesus rose from the dead changes everything. Through it, God transforms the suffering, grief, loss and misery of this world into glorious life and joy. Because Peter understood that in Jesus’ death God’s absolute and catastrophic judgment took place, he realized he was free in Christ to live fearlessly as a Christian no matter the consequences.

Second, that to be free in Jesus means to be doing Jesus’ work. Jesus commands Peter to **“feed my sheep.”** He’s not talking about mere physical food. He means feeding his people with the unchanging and life-giving food of his gospel. He means letting people know that though this world is filled with evil and suffering, and that no one in this world can escape either one, in Christ’s death for our sins and his resurrection from the dead, God has guaranteed that those who believe in his have total and eternal victory over these things. As Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospel of John, **“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”** (John 16:33 NIV)

You and I are the heirs of Jesus and Peter’s legacy. We follow the man who experienced the worse that this world can inflict on this person, and who came out of it victorious and gloriously alive. Neither you or I have answers for the painful and sometimes baffling pain of this world. But we can feed Jesus’ sheep with the assurance that in his death and resurrection he has overcome for us and for all who believe.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!