

Weekend of Sunday, May 1, 2022

3rd Sunday of Easter/Year C

First Reading: Acts 9:1-6[7-20]

Second Reading: Revelation 5:11-14

Gospel Reading: John 21:1-19

Sermon Title: “Loving Jesus”

Theme

The disciples make a big splash and eat breakfast with the risen Jesus. Wading in the water (remembering baptism) and eating with Jesus (celebrating holy communion) is our weekly encounter with the risen Christ. Jesus asks us again and again: Do you love me? And Jesus invites us, again and again, to follow him, bringing the Easter life to others.

Texts

First Reading: Acts 9:1-6 [7-20]

¹Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” [⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” ¹³But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”]

Second Reading: Revelation 5:11-14

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!”

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Gospel: John 21:1-19

¹After [he appeared to his followers in Jerusalem,] Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon 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.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶He 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. ⁷That 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. ⁸But 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.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹So 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. ¹²Jesus 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. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When 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.” ¹⁶A 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.” ¹⁷He 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. ¹⁸Very 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.”

Sermon

As I see it, the Gospel Reading for today can be broken down into two parts. The first part, verses 1-14, is the account of a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. This one occurred on the seashore of the Sea of Galilee. And the second part, verses 15-19, is a dialogue between Jesus and Peter. I will be spending most of my time in the latter because I find it to be the most compelling part.

I think you can tell by the first part of the reading that the disciples were not completely comfortable with the reality that Jesus has been resurrected. According to John's Gospel, Jesus appeared to Mary on Easter morning. And then that same evening to the disciples, minus Thomas. And then there was another appearance with the disciples a week later and that time Thomas was among them. Both of these last two events were covered in last week's Gospel Reading.

Now a lot could have been said about this fourth appearance. What is written leaves a lot of questions. John doesn't say, for example,

- Why do they just decide to go fishing?
- Or what work fishing would have been a break from?
- Or what they should have been doing instead of fishing?

But rather than get lost in the details that may or may not be meaningful let's be satisfied with the fact that some, but not all, of the disciples, decided to go fishing.

I want you to notice that Peter was among those fishing that day. And although he was not the first to recognize Jesus, I would like you to notice how exuberant he was about having another chance to be with his Lord. John wrote that upon hearing that it was Jesus on the shore, he grabbed some clothes and jumped out of the boat leaving his fellows behind to be with the Lord. I think it's curious that he put on clothes to jump in the water, but I digress.

Now we know from the Gospels, that Peter loved Jesus very much. But we also know that just a little over a week before, in what could be called Jesus' greatest moment of need, Peter denied knowing him. And not just once but three times.

None of the gospel accounts say anything about whether Jesus and Peter ever talked about it or not. But I am certain that they did. I suspect Jesus brought it up in one of his earliest appearances because I think it is in keeping with Jesus' style to want to bring reconciliation and grace to Peter, who I am quite sure felt horrible about what he had done. And Peter's delight in seeing Jesus was an indication of one who has had a great burden lifted off of his shoulders.

Well anyway, there was the great catch of fish, another sign from the Lord, and then breakfast on the beach followed by a great time of fellowship.

And then the second part of the reading took place. Jesus turned his attention away from everyone else and focused his attention only on Peter and asked him three times to proclaim his love for him. "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

It is hard to tell just from the reading, but I have always sensed frustration in Peter's answers. Was Jesus testing his faith? Was Jesus still angry about the denials? It is interesting – three denials - and then Jesus seemed to challenge Peter's love with his three questions.

In Peter's last response he answered, "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you." Imagine having a conversation with someone who could read you like Jesus could read Peter. There would certainly be no point in lying.

We'll never know for sure but I wonder if Jesus wasn't helping Peter discern his loyalty. I say that because right after the three questions Jesus told Peter some pretty unsettling things:

¹⁸Very 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."

As an aside, did you know these words from Jesus explain why pastors wear cinctures, the rope belt around our waists? It's not a fashion statement. It's an acknowledgment that as the "called and ordained" we are no longer in charge of our destiny and submit to God the Holy Spirit through the church and go where God sends us.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Are you sure about your love for me?
Because your journey of faith will not be one of your own choosing.

- You will be hated among the Jews;
- considered a controversial figure among the Jewish Christians;
- Gentile Christians will consider you prejudiced;
- and the Romans, – they will kill you.

"Simon, son of John, do you really love me?"

Jesus wasn't setting Peter up as the next messiah or even the first pope as many Roman Catholics think. But Jesus was counting on Peter to be a leader of this new Way of life, and he knew it would be a difficult journey. After all, they had killed him and he was the Messiah. How could a fully mortal follower expect to be treated? I think Jesus was simply helping Peter decide for himself what his priorities in life were.

If Jesus did indeed know everything as Peter had confessed, then Jesus knew that Peter would go on to be a faithful leader of the Christian movement. Peter would continue to be his impetuous self, often making mistakes, but it would not be for lack of love and devotion to his Lord. Jesus would have known that in his later years Peter himself would face persecution and eventually death for his devotion to Jesus. Peter's journey of faith would be a difficult one, arguably, as difficult as Jesus' own.

At this point I ought to tell you more about that little editorial note that John added in verse 19:

¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)

You see, in the writing of the church fathers, men who led the church during those first couple of centuries, it was written that Peter himself was crucified for his faith. But not crucified like Jesus was. After becoming a mature and faithful leader of the new Christian movement, Peter, it is said, found crucifixion like Jesus too high an honor for his then humbled soul. And so when his death was inevitable, he asked to be crucified upside down.

Let me say that again. In the end, Peter found crucifixion like his Lord's to be too high an honor, and so when his own death was inevitable he asked to be hung on *his* cross upside down. "Simon son of John, do you love me?" I think the answer is clear.

Jesus once told a parable about the forgiveness of debt. There were three debtors. One who owed much. One who owed a little. And one who owed an amount somewhere in between. All three had their debts forgiven and the question Jesus posed was 'which of the three was the most thankful.' The obvious answer was the one who had been forgiven the most.

In today's gospel, we have the story of a man who knew Jesus was the Messiah and then just moments after swearing his allegiance to him, denied even knowing him. That must have loomed largely over Peter's head. But Jesus brought him grace. His sin was forgiven and his guilt removed.

I am certain that the gospel stories began circulating soon after the resurrection. Can you imagine being Peter? "Oh, you are the one who denied knowing the Lord!" To this day we are still talking about him. Yet Jesus forgave him. And his life of faith and his response to grace is the reason Peter is worth remembering. Because Jesus always brings another chance. That's the kind of God we have revealed in Jesus Christ.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Do you love Jesus?

Do you really love Jesus?

Do you really love Jesus more than anything else?

What has he forgiven you? Do you owe him your life? I don't know how the journey of faith you are on will turn out, but are you willing to die for him?

To love Jesus is to know Jesus, because, as Jesus' words to Peter make clear, to love Jesus is to model your life according to Jesus' life. And Jesus' priority in life is indicated in his responses to Peter's answers, "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." To love Jesus – to really love Jesus is to love those whom he loves. And that is everyone. Even those who may want you dead. That's the

radical nature of Jesus' love for us. Pray with me that the Holy Spirit will fill your lives with Jesus' radical love so that you may be Jesus for others. That is the Christian calling.

Prayer

Merciful God, send your Holy Spirit to fill us with the radical love of Jesus, so that we may be Jesus for others. We pray this in his name. Amen