

Easter 3C
April 18, 2010

St. Andrew's

Acts 9.1-6 (7-10)
Ps 30
Revelation 5.11-14
John 21.1-19

There was a small but faithful group of hopeful (and perhaps delusional) razor clammers who went without their leader, Larry Fox, to Kalaloch early yesterday morning intending to smash all previous records for successful digging. Alas, it turns out that Larry's magic shovel only works when Larry is attached to it! We invoked the name of Jesus to see if that would help fill our nets like the disciples', but it apparently only works for fish or perhaps in Aramaic.

But what has had my attention for much of the week in thinking and praying with these lessons, is an online discussion that has been going on with my seminary colleagues. It was a very interesting topic tossed out there by someone now in Montana, of all places, who noted the increasing number of lengthy obituaries in the paper which concluded with, "No services will be held at the request of the deceased." She wondered if it was only local but no, it is quite national. With the easy availability of cremation, there is less need for a burial (cremations on the Peninsula are about 75%) and so it's much easier to skip the service. One rector noted that when he arrived on the job he found three containers of unidentified ashes in his desk drawer that had apparently languished there for years. We all commented on similar experiences; mine was just this past week. And in this Easter season, we mused about the apparent loss of hope or confidence or perhaps knowledge of the gift which God has given us in the resurrection of Jesus. I imagine it does make little sense to commend someone to God's keeping if you've not heard about it or don't trust whatever faith is in you that the promises are true. Then remains would just be ashes and easy to dismiss. It's a sorrowful thing when hearts and minds and eyes are not open to the mystery and power and hope of the Resurrection.

The Collect that was read this morning for this Third Sunday of Easter has a powerful phrase: *Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work.* Open the eyes of our faith. That's pretty obvious in the story of Saul's conversion when his eyes had been literally blinded by the presence of Jesus and opened through the laying on of Ananias' hands.

Opening the eyes of faith is occurring in the story of Peter and the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. You might think that the disciples had already had their eyes plenty opened. They have had two experiences of the Risen Jesus in John's gospel; once when Thomas was not with them in the Upper Room the evening of the Resurrection and once when he was. We might imagine with all this evidence mounting that they would be able to recognize his presence by now. But it doesn't seem so in the reading from John's gospel today. Thomas Troeger has written that if we are tempted to read John's story thinking that we would never be so obtuse in identifying Christ, we are warned not to be so sure. There is a good chance we are as slow to recognize his presence as the disciples in the boat.

They are back on the Sea of Galilee where they had been found by Jesus three years ago. This is where they had been first called; leaving their nets to follow this charismatic preacher. After all they had seen and done, after everything they had experienced in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, after everything they had seen and proclaimed, they returned to their comfort zone.

Maybe they were puzzling it in their hearts and trying to work it all out. Maybe they were relieved to have seen Jesus alive again so that he could continue to do the hard and risky work and they wouldn't have to. Maybe, like us, they hoped that God would be doing whatever God does without involving them too deeply. James Harnish wonders if they said to one another when yet another start-up business had failed, "It was great while it lasted. We gave it our best shot. There's nothing left to do but try to get our old jobs back." So they went fishing.

If the disciples are about to experience another conversion by seeing Jesus alive, Saul the persecutor is about to be transformed into Paul the apostle when the scales fall off his eyes. He had been a one-man militia intent upon wiping out those followers of The Way. He had papers in his possession giving him authority to haul believers in to the Temple authorities.

The Rev. Wiley Stephens wrote that Paul, Peter, and the other disciples are given the grace of another day. They were given another chance, another vision of the God who had broken the chains of death. He writes that this grace of another day is repeated over and over again in scriptures: When Abraham and Sarah were beyond the age of bearing children, Isaac was born. Moses, on the run from murder in Egypt, was called to go back and confront Pharaoh. Paul was confronted on the way to Damascus to persecute the church and left ready to spread the church to the ends of the earth.

And Peter, after denying and abandoning Jesus, is shown, once again, the presence of the Risen Lord and this time he will accept the grace of another day and enter his own life of persecution and death willingly for the sake of the gospel.

Most scholars believe that Peter's threefold profession of love for Jesus parallels his threefold denial; that Jesus is giving Peter the chance to undo those betrayals and not just go back to the way things were, but to move beyond them from the past into the future. More important than Peter's denials is the grace of Christ. In the same way he returned for Thomas, to move him from doubt to faith, he now returns for Peter, to move him from faith to action. James Somerville writes that Jesus looks Peter in the eye and speaks the words that won him in the first place: "Follow me."

Jesus was waiting on the shore for Peter and the disciples. He had prepared yet another way to feed and strengthen them. He asked that their fish be added to his. Peter could no longer be comfortable in his former life of fishing. The journey he had set out on with Jesus three years ago was not yet over. The eyes of his faith were opened.

Peter, if you really love Jesus, you will have to leave what you know and the comfort of your previous life. Paul, if you really believe, you will have to leave the arrogant assurances of your position in the Temple and begin to protect and defend those whom you have been persecuting. Children, Jesus says, if you truly love me, you must leave your nets and follow me. Move from faith to action.

There is an article on a site called Working Preacher which comments that Jesus asks Peter three times for a confession of faith and three times he responds to Peter by giving him something to do: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Jesus' repetition isn't meant as a rebuke but as an absolution. And through this pattern of question and confession, Peter is forgiven and restored, but also commissioned. Peter is given work to do that matters. The Camp Marshall in Montana has it right in their motto: Commanded to love; Commissioned to serve. God redeems us for a purpose and each week we are beckoned to church to be greeted with absolution, grounded in identity, commissioned with purpose, and sent to serve the world God loves so much. It may be working with MANNA, putting together necessity bundles for foster children, providing transportation, or reading to kids in school.

But we cannot retreat. We cannot ignore what has been shown to us. When we do, we put ashes in a drawer because we don't believe there is anything more. When the eyes of our faith are opened yet again, through the patience and persistence of a God who does not tire of showing us the hope of the resurrection, we're also going to have to leave our safe harbors to follow.

James Harnish continues that we see Peter in ourselves because no matter how inspiring our first experience with Jesus, no matter how strong our sense of calling, we end up denying our Lord. Then we're tempted to say, "It was great while it lasted, but I think I'll go back to fishing." But morning comes and the Risen Christ shows up where we least expect him. We discover that the love of God is deeper than our denial and the calling of God is stronger than our failure to live into it.

This final chapter in John's gospel, continues Thomas Troeger, awakens memories of the darkness – the darkness of our hunger, the darkness of our failure to recognize Christ, the darkness of our denial – but at the same time it reminds us that none of this darkness has overcome the light. For the Risen Christ still calls, still feeds, still empowers even doubters and deniers. In all of our brokenness, God is able to work through us and we are never too damaged for God to use us. Only in God are we made worthy.

A world which does not know Jesus won't throw its nets out again because it's afraid they will return empty. It does not see the Risen Jesus in the small and large things of our lives and doesn't bother with burial prayers because there is no sense of the grace of another day. Sooner or later we all have to come to grips with our failures and the times we refuse to see Jesus when he comes to us. While the Paschal Candle still burns is a time when more than ever we pray that our eyes may be opened daily to our faith so that we may behold Jesus in all his redeeming work. Jesus shows us a new way of life in the world. We hear with joy the good news about the resurrected Christ. He is found wherever we cast our nets and at this table where he feeds us; waiting to forgive us, redeem us, re-commission us, and offer us the grace of another day.

Gail Wheatley+