

“Christ Appears in Our Ordinary Midst”

(a sermon based on John 21:1-19, page 115 in the New Testament, NRSV pew Bible)

by

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The disciples have returned to Galilee. Whether they there because (as in Mark’s Gospel) the Easter messenger at the empty tomb told them that is where they would see Jesus, or they are there because -- as the days and weeks have passed -- they have concluded there was nothing more they could do in Jerusalem. It is very likely that they think *the whole thing is over!*

For whatever reason, Peter has *gone home*. Galilee is where the Jesus-movement *began*. Here is where he and Andrew, together with James and John, had left their boats and their nets and had followed Jesus, to become *"fishers of men."* But that was some three years ago.

"We have found the Messiah!" they had exclaimed when we first met them in John’s Gospel (John 1:41).

Their hopes ran high as they responded to his call, dropping their nets and moving out among the villages. Jesus and they had stirred up the people. They gathered a crowd. Here, in Galilee, they saw Jesus’ healing miracles and heard his inspiring words. Here, on the shore of this same Sea of Galilee, *they had seen Jesus feed five thousand people* with five loaves of bread and a couple of fish. They had felt the excitement of the crowds.

Then, to their astonishment and dismay, things started coming apart. First, along the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus had said that the people would reject him (kill him) just as they had the other prophets God had sent to them.

Then, even more strangely, was the way Jesus acted at their last Seder Supper (communion) meal together, *as if he would never see them again* – saying that his body would be broken, his blood shed. The men and women disciples would be *scattered*, he said, *like a flock without a shepherd*. By one of them he would be betrayed. All of them would be afraid. So he said.

Peter replied: “*No way! He’d be there, even if it meant dying at Jesus’ side!*” (Mark 14:29) What happened after that was too horrible to think about.

Peter still wept silently whenever he thought of the three times he denied knowing Jesus! His *intentions* were good, but he made a bad decision when it came time to speak up. His actions that night (his three denials) only added to his grief and guilt.

They had given up their jobs (their place in society) to follow a dream of “changing the world” for the better -- for eternity, for God! -- but it turned out to be *so much more difficult* than they had expected. Now they came home, so much *less* than they *thought* they *ought* to be.

And now that they're on the beach back home in Galilee, what was there to do? What was there to say? You see, *their depression came with them*. Their lack of direction... Their inability to find the energy to deal with their pain, their grief, their guilt, the absence of Jesus, *the silence of God*. Their dreams had been betrayed; they had failed.

Peter was getting no better sitting in the sand on the shore of Galilee than he had been while hiding in the locked Upper Room. *Something had to be done!* Maybe that's what jolted Peter into action at this point in the story: *he just couldn't stand to keep on thinking about what had gone wrong...* about what he had done!

"I'm going fishing!" he said, and the others followed. Doing something -- anything -- always feels better than sitting and stewing. Hanging a "gone fishing" sign in the window is as good as any other activity, I suppose.

Probably there was reassurance in the familiar feel of the nets and the smell of the sea.

The seven men fished all night and failed to catch anything! That may also have been familiar -- causing a chuckle or two as they recalled other luckless nights. A sense of *deja vu* may have struck Peter, Andrew, James, & John, for it had been after just such a night, frustrated & fatigued, that Jesus had first called them to follow him. (Luke 5:1-11, Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20)

As dawn broke, and they rowed themselves back to shore, a friendly voice called out: "*Any luck?*"

"Nope. Either they're not biting, or we're out of practice. We've tried everything, all night; no luck."

"Put your nets down off starboard -- the right side -- here in shallows, here in the morning light."

They did... and an incredible tug on the net astonished the men. They jerked into frantic action. One stood up to look to shore to see what expert fisherman had called out to them.

"It is the Lord!" he exclaimed. That got Peter so excited that *he jumped into the water* & swam to shore! The stranger met them with a fire already lit, grilling some fish for breakfast.

If this *is* the "Risen Christ," *never has he appeared more "ordinary" than in this story!* This is not a miracle, no glowing white robe, no display of wounds, no display of divinity. *Christ is eating breakfast on a beach* with seven fishermen. How much more ordinary can you get!?

When we fail to recognize Jesus in our midst maybe *that's* why. We're looking for something special, unique, powerful, dramatic, *out of the ordinary!* But Christ appears at our most *ordinary* times, and that's what makes all life holy. God is manifest to us in the midst of ordinary daily life, because that is where we need Christ the most. In our depression, our worry.

This stranger on the beach had some bread... just as (on a nearby hillside three years earlier) Jesus had blessed five loaves & two fish and passed them around... just as in the Last Supper, Jesus had taken some bread, blessed it & broke it, saying: "*This is my body, broken for you.*"

Suddenly it all began to fit together: their call to follow, to become fishers of men; the symbols of fish & bread; the talk of raising the dead. They realize that *it is not over until they decide it is over*. If Jesus Christ comes to them in the midst of their most ordinary activities, when he is least expected, then he is *with them* always!

Their failures and guilt can be transformed into freshness and success, if they start up again. There is something about *the Spirit of God* which has *triumphed over death* that reawakens these broken men and feeds their spiritual hunger, *thanks to this quite ordinary stranger* (this beach-comber) who has grilled some fish for breakfast... and who invites them to join in!

Take note that Jesus came to the disciples. He didn't stay behind in Jerusalem, waiting for them to come looking for him... He wasn't waiting for them to make sacrifices of "atonement," or to "repent of their sins," before he would approach. *Jesus doesn't wait for them to come to him*, nor to the Temple, to confess their sins. He doesn't even wait for them to call upon his Name! *Jesus takes the initiative & comes to them.* (The church should do the same! We need to *go* where we are needed, not just wait for *visitors*.)

And he comes to them in *peace*. He doesn't say: "*Look, fellas, what I've done for you. Look what I've had to endure on your behalf!*" He doesn't thrust his nail-scarred hands into their faces and make them grovel in remorse. He doesn't even bring up the past! He asks about what they are doing *now*. He asks: "*How's it going?*" He simply comes alongside them.

Jesus reaches out to them, and gives them what they need, in spite of their *failings* and deep *disappointments*. He comes to them like a bridge between their hopes and their sad reality, between *what they ought to be*

and what *they actually turned out to be*. Jesus does the same for us. He comes to meet us *where we are, just as we are...*

I am tempted to leave it at that. Jesus comes to us in the midst of our most ordinary and uninspired lives, right where & when we need God the most, with no condemnation, but fully forgiven and with hope for the future. But this is not yet the end of the story. For Peter, there was something else -- his three denials! -- a sin *too great* (in his mind), impossible to forget, *too big to forgive* -- a stumbling block that Peter, “the Rock”, couldn't seem to *get over...* couldn't *get past*, without some help.

After they ate, *Peter had to face it*. But he couldn't bring it up on his own. In that, I'll bet Peter is like us: we don't want our *real* needs, our deepest failings, to be *known*. We'd rather carry them inside, imbedded in pain.

Jesus' spirit *already knows* our deepest need, before we even ask; so, Jesus again takes the initiative. "*Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me?*"

I can imagine how pained Peter's face must have been as he looked at this stranger, who reminds him of Jesus -- the very one he had *denied knowing*, denied *following*. We can imagine something passing between them like these thoughts:

"Do I love you? Lord, I betrayed you." I know you did.

"I denied you three times." I know you did.

"You mean you don't reject me? You don't cast me off!?"

No, Peter, I love you. Now, would you mind answering my question?

For Peter, Jesus' invitation to join in the picnic on the beach is more than just a sign of *acceptance*. It is a sign of his *forgiveness*. *His* story is for *us* all. This Easter appearance of Jesus assures me that -- no matter what we have done, no matter where we have gone, no matter how “bad” we think we are -- *God loves us and forgives us*.

Again, I'm tempted to end right there with that Gospel message: ***God accepts us and forgives us.*** But the story itself doesn't end even here; and the impact of this third (and final) Easter appearance does not stop there for Jesus' disciples. Not for Peter, especially, nor for us...

The antidote for Peter's ***three denials*** is three new opportunities to state his love for Jesus.

I recall the story of a man who told his bride on their wedding day, ***"I want you to know: I love you. That's what this ceremony is all about. And I don't expect to have to tell you again! If anything changes, I'll let you know."***

For Peter to say that "he loves Jesus" just once (one time) would be enough to *state the facts "for the record."* To say it a second time would underscore it. But Jesus knew that ***three times*** was needed for Peter's ***penance*** to purge whatever residual resistance he had to believing the Good News that ***Jesus knew of his denials*** and had nevertheless ***forgiven him.*** That is **grace**: undeserved good. Three times Peter states his love for Jesus.

Unlike the groom in that story, *we do need to put our love into words with one another as well as into our deeds with one another.* Which brings me to my final observation: Peter is given work to do. ***"Feed my lambs; tend my sheep."***

Jesus hosted the picnic on the beach not just for the physical and emotional nourishment his disciples needed. He wanted to give them the Gospel reassurance that they were accepted & forgiven ***for the purpose*** of giving them direction and power to *continue* his movement -- to serve.

By taking the initiative toward them & demonstrating ***his acceptance of them*** by eating with them, Jesus freed the disciples from their disillusionment and disappointment with themselves. Their failings and their fears simply didn't matter anymore! ***Jesus had forgiven them, so they could get beyond themselves and begin to act with confidence.*** Their low estimation of themselves is irrelevant. ***Forgiveness frees us to act with confidence!***

With forgiveness, Jesus freed the disciples from the residual effect of their sin (which is a reminder *to us* that Christ *has* overcome sin!) such that, ultimately, our mistakes, failures, betrayals, wrongdoings (yes, even our sin) *simply doesn't matter anymore*. Don't dwell on it (*mea culpa*), get over it; so you can get on with it, in God's name!

No longer hobbled by guilty feelings, these seven men returned to Jerusalem and began to speak out with new assurance. *Not self-assurance*, for now they spoke *in Jesus' name*, with the confidence gained through *forgiveness*! They spoke God's mind in God's own Spirit! (We'll hear that story next Sunday as we celebrate "Pentecost" the Birthday of the Church!)

Since Peter, who had fallen the hardest and was *forgiven the most*, was not likely to make any claims thereafter of moral superiority, he was the best candidate *now* to tend the flock, to feed the others. Only when Peter "the Rock" had become a pile of Rubble, was he ready to extend acceptance and forgiveness to others.

We, too, are invited by Jesus to join that picnic on the beach in our own day and in our own way. Jesus is the host, and *he won't leave anybody out* from his table.

We, too, are accepted and forgiven by Jesus. *Our failures and sins* (as well as those of others that have been directed against us) *can be transformed into good* by accepting the love of God, which is extended in grace (unearned & undeserved) and claimed by faith.

The mission of Jesus' disciples, as they now become his "apostles" -- his students have "graduated" (one might say) through these several Easter experiences and their consequent experience of forgiveness -- *is to gather the scattered flock, feed the lambs, and tend to their health & growth...*

The mission continues in each of us: to proclaim in our words and in our actions **what Jesus' resurrection/restoration means to us...** and what it can mean to others. In spite of our mistakes & disappointments; in spite of

the apparent *defeat* of what we believe in and what we hope for; in spite of the apparent *triumph* of what is *evil, harmful, & petty*; in spite of all evidence to the contrary, there is hope beyond our wildest expectations! ***We are a resurrection people!*** We can look forward confidently, as we work toward that day *when God's dreams come true*, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.