



ST. MICHAEL'S SERMONS

Greenville, SC

April 22, 2007

John 21:1-19

Vicar Elise Stringer

The Summons

The Easter lilies are gone, the glorious cross bearing vibrant flowers has been put away for another year and the trumpets are not here to sound off in praise and adoration.

I don't know about you, but as I stand here this morning, it's as if Easter was long ago.

But it was only 2 ½ weeks ago that most of us were here together on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, singing, stripping the altar and sitting in front of a black draped cross with lumps in our throats, awaiting the death of our Lord.

Then on Easter Sunday, many of us passed through this place to get a look at the empty tomb. We approached that tomb with some of the same amazement and fear as those who first discovered it. We gathered together on Easter morning to hear a word of Resurrection and life, to shout and sing Hosanna to the highest!

And now, just a few weeks later, in the midst of the Easter season, which began Easter day... it's back to business as usual. Back to the chores, back to the office, back to school...back to the busyness of our lives.

The same goes for the disciples.

In the Gospel lesson from John we read that they are back to work as usual: out in the Sea of Tiberias on a fishing trip.

Then...while they are still on the water, Jesus shows himself again to the disciples...

"Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' 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. 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 and jumped into the sea."

Jesus' voice came to them through the morning haze of a fruitless fishing trip. As before, the disciples had no fish, they had caught nothing. And as before the sheer power of Jesus' presence was felt on the water. When the disciples did as Jesus said and cast their nets on the right side of the boat, they caught so many fish they could not pull the net in.

Again, Jesus came to the disciples.

He came to them in the midst of what appeared to be a hopeless situation, and He gave them hope in the form of 153 fish and a breakfast He prepared for them on the beach.

The risen Christ didn't wait for the disciples to come and find Him, instead he met them where they were...on a fishing trip, going about the business of their daily lives.

He does the same for us. He comes to us.

In the painful wake of grief, following the tragedy at Virginia Tech this week, it can feel as though the Easter message of resurrection life, of hope and joy, has grown dim. It can feel as though the Jesus that rose from the tomb that Easter morning is out of our reach and we are left alone in this world to wade through the pain and suffering.

But as Easter people, the people who have seen the empty tomb and the resurrected Jesus, we know that Christ is alive and therefore we are not alone.

He walks with us. And He walks with those students, family, faculty and friends at Virginia Tech.

Just as Jesus came to the disciples on the Sea of Tiberias...He comes to us, amid the busyness of our daily lives, amid the pain and brokenness in our world, and he stays with us, shares a meal with us, loves us and heals us.

We know this because God promised us "Immanuel God with us" and God doesn't break His promises.

In the words of Rev. Bill King, Virginia Tech. Campus Pastor, *"We come to this place to testify that the light of love can not finally be defeated. Amid all our pain, the light shines in the darkness and darkness has not overcome it. We cannot do everything, but we can do something. We can not banish all darkness but we can, by joining together, push it back. We can not undo Monday's tragic events, but we can sit in patient silence with those who mourn."*

And today as we gather together in this place to worship, to sing, to pray and to share a meal, we testify that Christ, the light of the world, who conquered sin, death and the devil is Risen, Christ is Risen indeed, Alleluia! And that is Good News!

"Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he jumped into the sea."

He didn't wait for the boat to reach the shore. He plunged into the water and eagerly swam to Jesus. I can just picture the excitement on his face as he hurriedly swam a hundred yards or so to meet Jesus. Simon Peter, the man who denied Jesus three times, doesn't hesitate even for a moment when he hears that his Lord is on the shore. He throws himself into the water and swims to meet Him. It appears that Peter the denier actually loves Jesus very much!

So how did Peter overcome the failure, the shame, and the embarrassment of his threefold denial of Jesus Christ? How did he live with his Lord's death?

He was forgiven and Jesus came to him.

Jesus' appearance to Peter, and Peter's eagerness to plunge into the water to meet Him celebrates the gift of grace! The gift of grace we are so freely given in Jesus Christ. The world is full of people and lives that are smashed by guilt, shame and judgment; lives destroyed by pain and suffering. But the good news of Easter is that out of death comes life.

And even through denial, shame and guilt, Jesus extends a hand to Peter and Jesus extends a hand to us...a hand of love and forgiveness.

The God who did not abandon Christ in His death would not abandon Peter. Peter is not disowned but loved and called to follow Christ. We too are not disowned in our own denials of Jesus Christ; we are not abandoned in our own guilt and shame. But instead we are loved and called again to follow him.

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' Peter said to him, 'Yes Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.'

Jesus doesn't ask Peter just once or even twice, but three times he repeats the question, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

And three times Simon Peter answers Him, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Peter was hurt by the persistent questioning of his love for Jesus.

There are so many other questions Jesus could have asked Peter. "Do you promise never to betray me again? Do you see now why I had to wash your feet? Are you going to change your ways and follow me?" But Jesus doesn't ask any of those questions, instead he asks again... "Do you love me?"

This God-made-flesh is interested in one thing, the heart of the one before him; the gift of a person, broken and tarnished, yet created in the image of God.

The most important question...Can we say we love Jesus more than these? Would we fling ourselves from the boat and swim to him?

Imagine with me for a moment. Jesus looks each of us face to face, calls us by name and says, "Do you love me more than these?"

What do we say? Think about it, take a moment and think about it. Give the answer to the Lord when you are ready, even if it isn't perfect. Put it into words, either in your heart, or out loud. What would we say?

Now Hear Jesus' response to us, "***Feed my lambs.***" Then two more times He asks, "Do you love me?"

How does the question make us feel? What does it do to us? Does it make us feel guilty or uncomfortable? Does it excite us and challenge our faith?

The tender but unnerving question, "St. Michael Lutheran Church, Do you love me?" Are you willing to risk all that you have to follow me?

Sit with it. Let the words echo inside. Let our Lord's question stir our hearts and minds.

Maybe we will reply as Peter did, "Lord, you know everything, you know that we love you."

Or maybe our answer would be something like, "Lord, you know everything, you know that we want to love you, we want to believe in you and live a good life. But sometimes our fear and our guilt get in the way. Sometimes our anger and our pride overwhelm us. Sometimes the distractions of daily life keep us from loving you. We want to love you but sometimes we just don't know how."

Jesus answers us, "Feed my lambs."

In spite of our insecurities, in spite of our failure to love Jesus with our whole heart, mind and spirit, Jesus' answer to us is not a word of condemnation, but a call to service...***Feed my sheep.***

A call that says to each of us, broken, sinful creatures that we don't have to be perfect, that we are loved, forgiven and equipped for service in Christ's mission and ministry, just as we are.

Feed my sheep: Love one another. Forgive one another. Give to those who have none. Support one another in ministry. Teach our children the faith. Give more than you take.

"After this Jesus said to Peter, 'Follow me.'"

Just as He came to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, today, in this place, Jesus comes to us...In this midst of the busyness of our lives. He comes to us and He calls us by name to feed his sheep.

He invites us to be part of His risen life on earth, the Church, His body in this place.

The good news is that in his life, death and resurrection Jesus has spoken the ultimate word of love to us. How will we respond?

"Will we go where we don't know and never be the same? Will we leave ourselves behind, will we care for cruel and kind? Will we let the blinded see, will we set the prisoners free? Will we love the us we hide, will we quell the fear inside and never be the same?"

We have seen the empty tomb and the resurrected Jesus. We know that he's alive because he comes to us and he calls us to follow Him! Together, let us go and follow Him!

Thanks be to God! Amen.