

The Restoration of Peter

John 21:1-19

April 22, 2007

I.

Sometimes we have long readings during Easter, and today is no exception. What we just heard has several different stories that could produce several different sermons.

There is a story about another resurrection appearance by Jesus. If I had planned a sermon on this part I might emphasize how these resurrection appearances foreshadow our own hope for eternal life

There also is a story about how the disciples couldn't catch any fish on their own, but when they followed Jesus' advice they caught more fish than they could handle. The lesson there might be to trust in the Lord rather than ourselves.

And there is the story of Jesus fixing breakfast for his disciples, most of whom ran off and left him when he was arrested. Seven of them were there that morning, and they certainly were not carrying out the ministry Jesus envisioned for them. In fact, they had gone back to doing what they did before Jesus ever came along. A sermon on this part might emphasize Jesus' own example of servanthood, and how a call to ministry never goes away.

Those all would be interesting sermons that I might preach at other times. Today, however, I want to talk about Peter. For me, this reading is about Peter. It's about Peter who, earlier on the night of Jesus' arrest, sat around a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the High Priest and three times denied that he ever knew Jesus.

And then it is about Peter who, several mornings later, sat around a charcoal fire on the beach with the risen Christ and three times was given the chance to redeem himself.

II.

When I read this part of the Gospel I think about an old preacher who had served the church for many years, and finally retired. He went home and put a sign up on his front door that said "done preaching, gone fishing."

Now, Peter had not served the Lord as long as that old preacher, but in some ways his actions in today's reading were similar. Peter also might have felt that he was done, and it was all over for him. The Holy Spirit had not yet come at Pentecost, and he did not yet fully understand the resurrection. He probably felt that he had nothing left to look forward to, and so he might as well go fishing again. Perhaps it was a good way to get away from it all.

With this background, let's look at Peter in a little more detail. We recall from Gospel readings throughout the year that Peter was sort of a bombastic and good-hearted enthusiastic fellow who often missed the points that Jesus was trying to make, but at times showed remarkable insights.

For example, this was the impetuous Peter who jumped out of a boat in the middle of a storm and tried to walk on water to meet Jesus and almost drowned. But it also was the Peter who was the first to understand through revelation that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

It also was the Peter who Jesus referred to as Satan and told to get behind him, but yet it was the same Peter who Jesus said was the rock upon whom he would build the church.

Finally, this was the Peter who told Jesus before he was arrested that he was ready to die with him, but only a few hours later denied on three occasions that he even knew Jesus. And the

Gospels tell us that Jesus had predicted Peter's denials before they even happened, and that when Peter realized the prophecy had come true he wept bitterly, and was deeply ashamed.

III.

So, coming back to today's reading, what do we imagine Peter was thinking after he decided to walk away from it all that night and go fishing, and then saw Jesus there on the shore the next morning?

Well, the reading tells us that as soon as Peter realized it was the risen Lord he put on his clothes and jumped into the sea. We don't know why he did this, but knowing something about Peter we can speculate that he might have been anxious about his standing with Jesus, and he might have hoped for some way to put his acts of betrayal behind him.

After all, Peter was not one to hide his emotions, and he most likely was still feeling remorse as having denied his Lord at the worst possible time. Even though Jesus no doubt still loved Peter, it is easy to see how Peter himself might have felt distant from the man he once served.

What could have been going through Peter's mind during this time? The Gospel suggests to us that Peter sat there in silence during the entire breakfast because Jesus' three questions to Peter were not asked until the breakfast was over.

Peter must have been wondering what was going to happen next. He certainly could not have forgotten that in the moment of testing he had denied his Lord. And now Jesus was sitting with him around a fire fixing breakfast for everyone and probably acting as if nothing had happened on the night of his arrest

I can imagine that Peter kept his head down and nervously looked at Jesus out of the corners of his eyes several times. I can imagine that Peter was sitting on pins and needles with his stomach churning and hoping that something could be done to set things right in his own mind.

And then what happened? Without any preliminaries or forewarning Jesus turned to Peter and asked point-blank if Peter loved him. Peter said that he did, and Jesus then instructed him to "feed my sheep." Then Jesus asked basically the same question two more times, with the same answer from Peter and the same follow-up instruction from Jesus.

Three times it happened. Peter, do you love me. Lord you know that I do. Then feed my sheep. By asking Peter the same question three times, Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to wipe away and overcome his three denials. Each reaffirmation on that beach cancelled out an earlier rejection.

As a result, Jesus restored and redeemed Peter. Jesus let Peter know that he still had a calling as an apostle, and he enabled Peter to move beyond his earlier work of serving Jesus' earthly ministry and to begin the ministry that would lead to the founding of the church.

We will hear from readings in coming weeks that Peter indeed became the leader of the apostles after receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And we know from tradition and writings of the early church fathers such as Clement, Dionysius, and Tertullian that Peter also was martyred as Jesus foretold, and was crucified under the reign of Nero.

IV.

So what can we learn from this reading to help us in our Christian lives today? I would like to suggest two things. One comes from Jesus' questions to Peter, and the other from Jesus' instructions to Peter.

On the first point, Jesus' questions asked whether or not Peter loved him. It is clear not only from this exchange, but also from Jesus' entire ministry, that mutual love was fundamental to his relationship with the disciples. And it is clear that Peter, who in his own mind had sinned greatly, found that could be forgiven for his transgressions as a result of this mutual and unconditional love.

In the same way it is equally clear from Scripture and the teachings of the church for two thousand years that the love Jesus expressed and expected then is still part of our faith today. We also are called to love each other in the same way as Jesus loved the disciples then, and loves us still.

And this love also was the foundation of Jesus' instructions to Peter. When Jesus said "feed my sheep" it was not just an instruction to minister to the hungry or starving. It was broader than that, although it certainly included it.

Jesus was talking about spiritual food, not just physical nourishment. He was speaking figuratively, in metaphorical terms, about evangelism, and discipleship, and the universal ministry of the baptized.

When Jesus said "feed my sheep" he was calling Peter, as we are called today, to preach the Word of God, to pray to and worship our Lord, to reach into the community in Christian love, to bring people from the community into the church, and to do our best to live exemplary and holy lives.

Now, obviously, that does not mean that we are called to prepare ourselves for death in the service of our Lord as was Peter's fate. Times are different now, and in America we don't experience the religious persecution that is all too prevalent in other parts of the world.

And while we honor the sacrifices of those who even today are dying for the faith, most of us are called to live long lives of faithful ministry rather than shorter lives of dramatic martyrdom.

V.

In a way today's Gospel is a story of two resurrections. Obviously, the first was an appearance of Jesus after he was raised by God from the dead. The second, and not as dramatic but still important, was the restoration of Peter after he had died inside and felt that all he had left was to go fishing.

Jesus showed him otherwise. Jesus demonstrated to Peter that his love and willingness to forgive could transcend even denial and rejection. And Jesus made it clear that if Peter loved him then Peter would show that love to others by caring for the flock that Jesus left behind.

The same applies today. Part of Christian life is knowing we can trust in our Lord's forgiveness if we sincerely seek it. A counterpart is that we are also called to carry on today's version of the instruction that Jesus gave to Peter—feed my sheep, care for my flock, you are my hands and feet, you now stand in my place to do this work. Let us always remember that our blessings come with these responsibilities. *Amen.*