

JESUS CALLS US
Third Sunday of Easter

(04/22/12)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 4:12-25
John 21:1-19

Jesus said to him [Simon Peter], "Feed my sheep." (John 21:17)

Easter has come and gone. Most of the decorations that graced our sanctuary, including the beautiful lily cross, have been removed. The lilies and tulips are scattered to our homes where we can plant them outside that they might return year after year.

The scripture lesson from the Gospel of John speaks to the experience of the disciples following our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. It not only reports their words, it also conveys their feelings.

Jesus has been crucified. His body has been laid in a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea, whom the Bible describes as a disciple. On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. When she arrives, she finds the stone has been rolled away. She runs and tells Peter and John. They examine the empty tomb, but they do not understand what has happened. They simply return to their homes.

Mary remains by the tomb. Suddenly she becomes aware of two angels, one at the head and one at the foot of the place where Jesus lay. The angels ask her why she is weeping. In the process of answering their question, Mary realizes there is a man standing behind her. Supposing him to be the gardener, she asks him if he knows who has taken the body of her Lord and what they have done with it. It is only when Jesus calls her name that she recognizes him.

Jesus tells Mary to tell the disciples, whom he refers to as his brothers, that he is ascending to the Father. Mary tells them that she has seen the Lord, but the disciples do not believe her. Their minds cannot yet grasp what has happened.

Later that day, as the disciples are gathered behind locked doors, Jesus appears in their midst and tells them, "Peace be with you." He shows them his hands and his side. Then he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Thomas is not there with the other disciples. When the disciples tell him they have seen the Lord, he says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later, the disciples are once again gathered behind closed doors. This time Thomas is with them. Jesus suddenly comes and stands in their midst. He tells them, "Peace be with you." He tells Thomas to touch his hands and his side. When he does, Thomas realizes it is the Lord. Jesus then says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The disciples' experiences of the risen Christ are powerful experiences. Because of these experiences, Mary and the disciples realize their Lord lives not only in their memories but also in

their lives and in the world. They receive his blessing of peace. Then they receive the Holy Spirit, the breath of new life. This should have been all that was necessary to transform doubters into believers, disciples into apostles.

The terms “disciple” and “apostle” are used somewhat interchangeably in the gospels. The followers of Jesus fall into several categories. Most of the people of the land were probably indifferent to the person and teachings of Jesus. The “crowds” were comprised of those who were somewhat curious. The “followers of Jesus” were those who made a commitment to be a disciple of the Way. According to scripture, there were several hundred followers.

From this relatively large group of followers Jesus calls twelve disciples. These twelve travel with him for the three years of his ministry. They hear his words and witness his healing miracles. In some passages, however, it seems that there are more than twelve disciples, for people like Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea are also described as disciples.

With regard to the distinction between disciples and apostles, I think the disciples become apostles after Jesus’ death. Whereas the disciples were followers of Jesus and the spiritual discipline he shared with them, the apostles were called to bring Jesus’ teaching, the Good News of the kingdom of God, into the world and carry out his ministry of healing.

Following the resurrection and the post-resurrection experiences of the risen Christ in the upper room, the disciples should have become apostles. But they don’t. Instead, Peter says to the other disciples, “I am going fishing.”

As we heard this morning, before they became disciples Peter, Andrew, James and John were fisherman. When he called them to be his disciples, Jesus told them they would become fishers of people. However, following the resurrection, instead of moving forward into a new life and ministry, they return to the place where they began. Once again they are fishers of fish.

The disciples move backward in their faith instead of moving forward. Admittedly, it was not easy for them to grasp what they had seen, what they had heard, what they had experienced following the resurrection. These experiences were leading them into new territory, into a new way of looking at life – and also into a new way of looking at death. They were forced to consider the possibility that not only did death not hold sway over Jesus; it might also not hold sway, hold ultimate power over them. The post-resurrection encounters with the risen Lord pulled back the curtain of death and opened them up to the possibility of eternity, to the experience of eternity.

In their post-resurrection encounters, Mary Magdalene and the other disciples had what we would call a religious experience. They had what could be called an epiphany, the moment when you realize something you didn’t know before, the moment when you embrace or are at least invited to embrace a new paradigm. However, instead of moving forward into this new paradigm, instead of making the transition from disciples to apostles, they regress. They go back to where they were before they experienced Jesus’ call. They drift back into the old way of life, the easy way of life. Instead of moving forward, they move backwards.

There are several lessons that we can glean from the disciples' post-Easter experience. The first is the recognition of our more than marginal propensity to move backward in life instead of forward, to move backward in our faith instead of forward. Instead of taking those precious moments of prayer, of worship, of presence and moving forward into them, we consign them to the dusty back rooms or the cluttered basement of our lives. We live out days, weeks, months, even years without attending to or deepening our relationship with our risen Lord, and hence without the consciousness of his presence. After the joyous celebration of Easter has come and gone, we simply settle back into the normal routines of our very busy lives.

The second is about the emptiness of this kind of life, a life devoid of faith, relationship and a sense of presence. The disciples return to their old lives, their old ways. But it is not the same. We should never be the same after an Easter experience. Scripture tells us the disciples fished all night but they came up empty.

If we are honest, we will admit that the old ways, whatever they are, are empty. If we are struggling against the demonic power of an addiction, it is tempting to return to the bottle or the racetrack. However, if we have had an experience of having been helped and strengthened by our Higher Power, the minute we go off the wagon we will discover that the alcohol, the food, the adrenaline rush of gambling has lost its luster. We can never really go home again, especially not after we have been changed through an encounter with the risen Christ.

When the disciples return to their nets, they separate themselves from the presence of their Lord and they close their ears to his call. The third lesson of today's scripture is a revelation concerning how this gap is bridged. Note that the disciples were not searching for Jesus. They were simply fishing. They were not searching for Jesus, but Jesus was searching for them.

As we heard this morning in the account of the calling of the first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John were not looking for Jesus. In fact, they were probably not looking for anything. They were not searching for Jesus, but Jesus was searching for them.

If we think about it, we will realize that we have had many Easter experiences in worship, in prayer, and in our daily lives. When these drift out of consciousness, when they fade into the background, when their power is diminished by the mundane tasks and activities of our daily lives, when we even forget to search for that from which we have become separated, all is not lost. Just as with the disciples, God reaches out to us through the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit who dwells both within and among us.

The fourth lesson is that the risen Christ not only finds us, he feeds us. Christ not only helps the disciples experience abundance in their daily tasks, he actually feeds them. When they arrive at the shore, they find he has prepared breakfast for them. He feeds them with fish and bread. He feeds them with his body and his blood. And he offers this spiritual food to us.

Like the disciples, we can be spiritually fed and nourished in many ways. We can be fed in our moments of worship. Perhaps we will be touched by a word of scripture. Something we never heard, something we never realized jumps out at us. I am often touched by the words of

our old-time hymns. We can be fed by our moments of prayer and the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We can be fed through our fellowship and our mission outreach. And our souls can be nourished by our encounter with the risen Christ in our everyday lives.

The final lesson in today's scripture is that Christ calls us to make a commitment. He called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to become disciples. He told Peter to feed his sheep. The experience of the risen Christ, whether it occurs on the beach, in our daily tasks, or on the road, always asks something of us. It challenges us to halt the regressive backsliding that pulls us away from our church and our own spiritual journey. It calls us to move forward into the world as apostles, as bearers of the Good News not only in our words but also in our actions.

That's the way it is with Jesus. Every experience of him turns out to be a call to work for him. Revelation and call go together. The risen Christ does not just say to the disciples on the beach, "I am Jesus, raised from the dead." He says, "I am Jesus, raised from the dead, and I have some work for you to do."

He tells them to feed his sheep. This is so typical of Jesus. To the very ones who only a few days earlier had forsaken him, to those who were nowhere to be found when he was arrested and crucified, he issues a call to apostleship. He entrusts to these very human men and women his most important work.

What work is the risen Christ calling us to do as a church? What work is the risen Christ calling us to do as members of this church? When he says, "Feed my sheep," what do you think this means for us as a church? What do you think this means for you?

We need to think about this not only today, as we are touched by special moments during our service of worship, but tomorrow when, like the disciples, we have returned to our normal, everyday life. Christ would keep us from drifting back into the old ways. The old ways are empty, and we know it. Over the tumult of our lives, with all our cares and concerns, with all our heavy burdens, Christ calls us to something new – both for us and for the world.

The text to our closing hymn this morning, *Jesus Calls Us*, was written by Cecil Francis Alexander in 1852. It was written in conjunction with St. Andrew's Day, which is why in the original version we find the words "As of old St. Andrew heard it." Recent hymnals broadened the application of the hymn by changing the words to "As of old the apostles heard it." But no matter what version of the hymn is included in a particular hymnal, what is it that the disciples heard? They heard the call to apostleship.

We are called to be apostles, to carry out Christ's healing work and word in the world. We are to be his hands and feet. People should encounter Christ through us. One of my favorite sayings is the following: "Live in such a way that those who know you but don't know God, will come to know God because they know you."

Like Peter, we are called to be apostles. But we are also disciples. We, too, are in need of teaching. We, too, are in need of healing. You know, our response to his call might even be the path to healing in our life. If we give our hearts to his obedience, if we serve and love our

Lord, we might find the restless tumult of our life is calmed. Through his presence we might experience inner healing. Then we can bring a healing presence to everything we do.

In some ways Easter has come and gone. In other ways it hasn't. As we heard this morning, the original Easter event did not end with the empty tomb. It lived on in the ways that the risen Lord reentered his disciples' lives. It lived on in the ways that they became conscious of the Holy Spirit both within and among them. It lived on in their transformation from disciples to apostles, in the ways they responded to his call.

Like the disciples, the Easter event can also live on in us. It can live on in the ways that the risen Lord reenters our normal, everyday lives. It can live on in the ways, in the times, in those brief moments when we become conscious of his presence as the Holy Spirit both within and among us. It lives on in our response to his call to become disciples of the Way, to carry out our Lord's healing, reconciling work in the world.

Like the disciples who initially returned to their old ways, when we feel ourselves alone, lost, separated from God and from the comforting, strengthening, healing power of Christ (and we all feel this way at times), remember. Even when we don't have the sense to reach out to him, he is reaching out to us. All we have to do is open our eyes, open our hearts, and open our minds. Then we will be able to see what is right before us. The risen Christ will find us, nourish our souls, and call us forth into life. Then he will give us some work to do.

Let us be about this work as resurrection people, both as individuals and as a church.

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