

## JESUS CALLS US

(04/30/17)

Scripture Lesson: John 21:1-19

*Jesus said to him [Peter], "Feed my lambs." (John 21:15)*

Easter has come and gone. With the exception of the cross that is draped in white, the color of Easter, which will remain up throughout the Easter season, the decorations that graced our sanctuary have been removed. The lilies are scattered to our homes, where hopefully we can keep them alive for a while or even plant them outside that they might return year after year.

The scripture lessons we will explore throughout the Easter season speak to the disciples' experiences following our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. The Gospel of John is helpful in this because John not only reports the disciples' words but also tells us how they felt.

Jesus has been crucified. His body has been laid in a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea, who is described by Matthew as a disciple of Jesus. 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 where they are staying.

Mary remains by the tomb. Suddenly she becomes aware that two angels in white are sitting at the head and the foot of the place where Jesus lay. They ask her why she is weeping. In the course of responding to their inquiry, Mary suddenly experiences a presence. She turns around and sees Jesus. Mistakenly supposing him to be the gardener, she asks him if he knows who has removed her Lord's body from the tomb and what they have done with it. It is only when Jesus calls her name that she recognizes the one to whom she is speaking.

Jesus tells Mary to tell the disciples, whom he refers to as his brothers, that he is ascending to the Father. Mary goes and tells the eleven remaining disciples that she has seen the Lord and reports what he has said to her, but it does not seem that they believe her.

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

Thomas Didymus, the one who is called the twin, is not there with the other disciples when this takes place. When his fellow 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. (John 20:25)*

A week later, the disciples are once again gathered behind closed doors. This time Thomas is with them. Jesus suddenly, mysteriously comes and stands in their midst. He tells them, "Peace be with you." He then tells Thomas to go ahead and touch his hands and his side. When he does this, Thomas realizes it truly 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. (John 20:29)*

I like it when Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" because this describes us. We have not actually seen Jesus in his human form. We were not there to listen to his teachings and observe his healings. And yet we have come to believe.

The disciples' experiences of the risen Christ following Jesus' resurrection are powerful religious or spiritual 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. They receive the Holy Spirit that he breathes into them, the breath of new life. This should have been all that was necessary to transform doubters into believers, disciples into apostles.

Actually, the followers of Jesus fall into several categories. We can think of them as inhabiting concentric circles. Most of the people of the land were probably indifferent to Jesus and his teachings. They would be on the outside circle. The "crowds" are those who, on events like Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, are at least curious. The followers of Jesus are those who are even closer to the center. Some of them may have had personal contact with Jesus or travelled with him. It is recorded that some of them, specifically some of the women, provided for him and his disciples. According to scripture, there may have been several hundred followers.

From this group of followers Jesus calls twelve disciples. These are his inner circle, his daily companions, the ones who travel with him, who hear his words and witness his healing miracles. In some passages, however, it seems that there are more than twelve disciples and that people like Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea are or could be described as disciples.

I think the disciples become apostles after Jesus' death. Whereas disciples are students, followers of the spiritual discipline that we know as the Way, apostles are ordained to bring the Good News of the kingdom of God into the world and carry out their Lord's ministry of healing. Following the resurrection and the post-resurrection experiences of the risen Christ, the disciples should have become apostles. But they don't. As we heard this morning, Peter says to the other disciples, "I am going fishing."

Before they became disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John were fisherman. When Jesus called them to be his disciples, he told them they would become fishers of people. Now they have returned to the place where they began. Once again they are fishers of fish.

This passage is a classic description of backsliding. Backsliding is a term used to describe the process of gradually turning away from one's religion or relapsing into sinful ways. It is not easy to be a disciple of Jesus, a disciple of the Way. The old way, whatever it is, has a certain power. In the case of an addiction, it can have a demonic power. There is something, either the power of inertia or some greater power, that works to draw us back into the old patterns of living, to draw us back from living the full implications of our Easter experience.

The phenomenon of backsliding is not uncharacteristic of the relationship that many people have with their church. If we were to compose a list of all those who have been touched, helped, or ministered to by this church over even the last twenty-five years, I suspect it would be quite a list. Yet most of these people are now on the inactive list. It takes dedication and commitment to become a vital part of one's church. It is not uncommon for people, like the disciples, to return to their old ways and habits.

The first lesson from this scripture passage is about our propensity to backslide. The second is about the emptiness of the old way. The disciples return to their old lives, their old ways, but it is not the same. We are never the same after an Easter experience, or at least we should never be the same. Scripture tells us they fished all night but they came up empty.

If we are honest, we will admit that the old ways are essentially empty. If we are struggling against the demonic power of an addiction, it is tempting to return to the addictive substance or activity. However, if we have had an experience of having been helped and strengthened by our Higher Power, the minute we relapse we discover that the alcohol, the heroin, the adrenaline rush of gambling has lost its luster. Thomas Wolff was correct when he said that we can never go home again. This is especially true after we have been changed by an encounter with the risen Christ.

When the disciples return to their old life, they separate themselves from the presence of their Lord and his call. The third lesson of today's scripture is a revelation concerning how this gap, this separation or alienation is bridged.

We have had many Easter experiences, moments when we have been touched by God or felt the presence of God. When these drift out of consciousness, when their power is diminished

by the mundane tasks and activities of our daily lives, we may feel that all is lost. Remember, the disciples are not searching for Jesus. They are simply fishing.

However, even at those times when we even forget to search for that from which we have become separated, all is not lost. We may not be looking for Jesus, but Jesus is looking for us. We may not be reaching out to Jesus, but Jesus is reaching out to us. Just as with Peter, God reaches out to us through the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit who dwells both within and among us.

So the third lesson is that God is always reaching out to us, even during those times when we are not reaching out to God. The fourth lesson is that Christ not only reconnects with the disciples, helping them to experience abundance in their daily lives, 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 also feeds us.

We can be nourished in our moments of worship. Perhaps we are touched by a word of scripture. Something we never heard, something we never realized jumps out at us. I am often moved to tears by the words and music of our anthems and our hymns. We can be fed in moments of prayer and as we share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. And we can be nourished by our encounter with the risen Christ if we can discover him in our everyday lives.

Finally, as is clear from our scripture lesson this morning, Christ calls the disciples to make a commitment. He tells them to serve others. Like the disciples, the experience of the risen Christ 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 also calls us to move forward into the world as apostles, as bearers of the Good News both in our words and in our deeds.

The risen Christ not only calls us to become disciples, followers of the Way; he calls us to become apostles, to carry out his work in the world. Christ tells Peter, “If you really love me as much as you say you do, you will feed my lambs.”

That’s the way it is with Jesus. Every conversion to him is 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 also doesn’t say “I am Jesus, raised from the dead; worship me.” He says, “I am Jesus, raised from the dead, and I have some work for you to do.”

Jesus tells his disciples to feed his lambs. This is 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 these very human men and women with his most important work. He does the same to us.

What work is the risen Christ calling us to do? When he says, “Feed my sheep,” what do you think he means? Do you think he is calling us to protect those who are most vulnerable: those who are the victims of misogynous, homophobic, anti-Semitic, racist, or Islamophobic prejudice, discrimination, or persecution? Do you think he is asking us to devote more of our abundant resources in this country to the one in six children who go to bed hungry every night? Do you think he is asking the world to devote more of its abundant resources not only to the care of the 65 million refugees that have lost their homes and their homelands, but to address the underlying conditions that give rise to this tragic situation?

We need to think about the invitation that Jesus extends to us not only today, in our service of worship, but also tomorrow when, like the disciples, we return 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.

When we feel we have lost touch with Jesus, we can reach out to him. He is not far from any one of us; in fact, he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. However, even during those dark times when we do not have the sense to reach out to him, all is not lost. You see, Jesus is reaching out to us. All we have to do is open our hearts. The risen Christ will search us out find us, give us a big hug, and nourish our souls.

Then he will give us his work to do.

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

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