

Third Sunday of Easter
Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30; John 21:1-19
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On this third Sunday of Easter, we have what I call “Peter and Paul Sunday.” The two most important figures in our faith, other than Jesus, are highlighted in our readings today. Both Peter and Paul get redirected after a surprise visit from the resurrected Christ.

As the curtain rises in our gospel, we find Peter and six other disciples back home on the shores of the large inland lake, where they once fished for a living. They are obviously at loose ends. According to John’s gospel, they had been visited twice by Jesus in the upper room after the resurrection. Once Thomas wasn’t there and the second time, a week later, he was, so that Thomas could move from doubt to faith.

What happened to the disciples after that second visit of Jesus is unclear. We’re not told by John. Without clear directions, we assume they gradually wandered back to their homes to check in on the wife and kids and parents.

Peter, always the leader, decides to fill his empty time doing what he knows best. “I’m going fishing,” he announces. The others are probably glad and relieved that someone has charted a course of action and they readily sign on to fish as well. Where the other four disciples are, God only knows.

Well, Peter may have been a good fisherman once, but it appears he’s gotten rusty after his long hiatus following Jesus. The good old fishing holes have been fished out or the fish have moved. They fished all night without success.

If last week in the upper room the disciples needed Jesus to rescue them from fear, this week on the sea, they need Jesus to rescue them from failure. “Cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some fish.” When their net becomes instantly full-to-overflowing, they recognize the stranger on the shore. Last week Jesus showed them his scars; this week he shows them a miracle catch.

Last week Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on them and sent them to forgive sins. This week he finds them fishing. They’re still exhibiting a dullness that characterized them during Jesus’ earthly ministry. Yet Jesus refuses to be upset with them. On the contrary, he has breakfast prepared for his wayward disciples. On the night before he died, you’ll remember, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and said, “Do likewise.” Even as the resurrected Lord, Jesus is serving his little band fish and bread. After fishing all night, you can imagine their joy at finding the food hot and ready to eat.

Once again, Jesus doesn’t say, “What are you doing fishing after all we’ve been through?” Instead, he greets them with gracious hospitality. “Come and have breakfast.”

I was particularly drawn to verse five in the Psalm we read earlier, “For his wrath endures but the twinkling of an eye, his favor for a lifetime.”

Jesus shows no wrath whatsoever for his accusers, executioners or unfaithful disciples. All we see displayed is his favor over and over, giving humankind another chance to get it right. “Come and have breakfast.”

Verse six of the same Psalm reads, “Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.” (Psalm 30:6) The fisherman had no luck in the dark of night having gone backwards since the resurrection, but in the morning Jesus brings them joy with a net load of fish and a hot meal.

Has our Easter joy worn off as well? Are we back to our old ways after a brief Easter high? Are we back to the drudgery of our small, provincial lives? Have the concerns of the world overshadowed and darkened any hope of seeing the world through resurrection lenses? Jesus is alive; we are alive! Change is slow. Keep the faith. Jesus will keep coming to the shore of our lives. Watch and pray. His favor lasts a lifetime. Joy comes in the morning.

Next Jesus turns to Peter. You get the impression that he’s really the one Jesus came for. Last week Jesus came back for Thomas; this week he appears for Peter. The rock needs a shove so he can get rolling. Three times Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” Three times Peter says, “Yes, Lord.” Three times earlier Peter had said, “I do not know the man.” Peter is reversing his denials with affirmations. Peter is getting his marching orders: “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.” Peter will become the Apostle to the Jews. Peter will become the Apostle to God’s lambs and sheep.

If we say we love Jesus, we will serve God’s people. Our actions will prove our words and our affections. “So faith by itself, without works, is dead.” (James 2:17) “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” The Lord answered, ‘When you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers or sisters, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25:38-40) Service is not optional or for extra credit. It is part of the core curriculum for all the baptized. We are fed here for service out there.

Act II this morning, from the Acts of the Apostles, features Saul, better known to us as Paul. In his zeal to safeguard the faith of his fathers from the Jesus’ followers, he asks permission for papers to extradite adherents of The Way in Damascus back to Jerusalem to stand trial. Saul has already overseen the stoning death of a Jesus’ devotee named Stephen in Jerusalem. He is certain this Jesus movement is heretical and a grave threat to Judaism.

If Peter was between engagements when he went fishing, Paul is fully engaged and purposeful on his expedition to Damascus. If Peter needs Jesus to nudge him in the right

direction, Paul needs Jesus to jolt him from the wrong direction. Peter may be floundering, but Paul is flat-out mistaken.

Paul is so blinded by his absolute insistence on being right about who the enemy is that he needs to be flooded in light until he can't see where he's going. Jesus knows he means well. His heart is devoted to God, but he needs a 180-degree course correction. Jesus wants to prevent him from doing further damage in his ignorance, so he knocks him to his knees. Paul is literally stopped in his tracks so he can be reprogrammed and enlightened. In the three days without sight he has time to consider what went awry. How could he have been so misguided? I believe his treatise to the Romans is his answer. Simply, sin beguiled him. Maybe Paul's experience on the Road to Damascus should caution us when we are so absolutely sure we are right about something or someone. It is possible we may be blinded by fear, prejudice, desire or our tradition?

The Conversion of St. Paul, as this incident is called, will make Jesus' enemy his greatest ally and promoter of the Christian faith in the pagan world. Paul will be called the "Apostle to the Gentiles." The Bible doesn't tell us how Peter and Paul died, but the tradition is that they both were martyred in Rome. Peter was crucified upside down because he didn't consider himself worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus. Paul was beheaded – the quicker, less painful execution allowed Roman citizens.

Peter and Paul are great saints, but they would have remained unknowns if Jesus had not directly intervened in their lives. Let us pray for Jesus to intervene in our lives so we, too, can do small things or large things with great love for God. Amen.