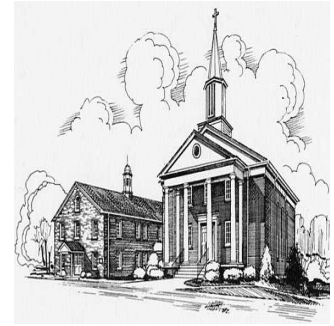


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Third Sunday of Easter

Year C

RCL



Acts 9:1-20

Psalm 30

John 21:1-19

The Collect

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 9:1-20

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so

they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the

people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

Psalm 30 Page 621, BCP

Exaltabo te, Domine

- 1 I will exalt you, O LORD,
because you have lifted me up
and have not let my enemies triumph over me.
- 2 O LORD my God, I cried out to you,
and you restored me to health.
- 3 You brought me up, O LORD, from the dead;
you restored my life as I was going down to the grave.
- 4 Sing to the LORD, you servants of his;
give thanks for the remembrance of his holiness.
- 5 For his wrath endures but the twinkling of an eye,
his favor for a lifetime.
- 6 Weeping may spend the night,
but joy comes in the morning.
- 7 While I felt secure, I said,
“I shall never be disturbed.
You, LORD, with your favor, made me as strong as the mountains.”
- 8 Then you hid your face,
and I was filled with fear.
- 9 I cried to you, O LORD;
I pleaded with the Lord, saying,
- 10 “What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the Pit?
will the dust praise you or declare your faithfulness?
- 11 Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me;
O LORD, be my helper.”
- 12 You have turned my wailing into dancing;
you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy.
- 13 Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing;
O LORD my God, I will give you thanks for ever.

John 21:1-19

Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

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 Je-

sus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disci-

ples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where

you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

SERMON

It's the third Sunday in Eastertide, and our text, called the Restoration of Peter, tells us of Jesus' third appearance to the Apostles after His Resurrection. Peter is everybody's favorite Disciple. It is Peter who is forever letting his mouth write checks he can't cash. It's Peter who tries to walk on water, Peter that blunders into open graves, Peter who promises faithfulness, then betrays Jesus not once, but three times. Peter is the most wonderful mess in the Jesus story.

The defining story about Peter, for many of us, is his three denials of Jesus. The third and last denial was the worst of all:

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Imme-

diately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: “Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.¹

Peter was so terrified that he called down curses on himself rather than admit his relationship with Jesus! That’s Peter screaming, “May lightning strike me where I stand if I’m lying. I don’t know the man!” After the terror is spent and he realizes what he has done, he wept bitterly, but what about the other Apostles? They heard his denials. How can they ever trust him again? Jesus named Simon the rock upon which the church would be built, but Peter is no more than crumbled sandstone at this point.

I think if Peter was an employee of any company today, he wouldn’t be an employee very long. He’s just not reliable. He has poor impulse control. Worse than

¹ Matthew 26:73-75 NIV

that, he has disrespected the product in public three times now. We really need more of a team player in that position. He's a nice guy, and I like him, but he's just not bringing his A game. I can't help but think he'd be more likely to realize his full potential in some other line. Don't you?

Yes, by any measure, Peter is a failure as a disciple, yet Jesus called him the rock upon which the church would be founded. We tend to write off failures. Oddly, Jesus doesn't. Jesus reaches out to restore them. That's why this is called the Restoration of Peter.

When I was looking for a starting point on poor old Peter, something to give us a sense of the way that God works even with those we would give up on, I ran into a sermon by a Methodist pastor, Barry Robinson, that contained this account:

During a Pastor's meeting, an old pastor stood

up to testify to his faith. Yet his testimony surprised a number of people. The pastor stood up and looked at the group and said, “I am a lay pastor of a small, not-growing church. I am not ordained. I am not seminary trained. I was asked to leave both Bible colleges I attended. I am divorced and remarried. On any given day I am capable of being a jerk with my wife and family. I am terminally insecure, which causes me to compensate with bouts of arrogance. At times people irritate me, and I hide from them. I am impulsive, which causes me to say things I shouldn’t and make promises I cannot keep. I am inconsistent.

My walk with Christ is a stuttering, stumbling, bumbling attempt to follow Him. At times His presence is so real I can’t stop the tears, and then, without warning, I can’t find Him. Some days my faith is strong, impenetrable, and immovable—and some days my faith is weak, pathetic, helpless, knocked about like a paper cup floating on the ocean in the middle of a hurricane.

I have been a Christian for 45 years. I am famil-

iar with the vocabulary of faith, and I am often asked to give advice about matters of faith. But I am still a mess. I am light-years away from being able to say with Paul, “Copy me.” I am 56 years old and still struggling—a flawed, clumsy, unstable follower of Jesus. A bona fide failer.”

As you can imagine, that one really stopped me. I thought it WAS me for a minute! A bona fide failer. That’s very often my estimate of my attempts to live up to the responsibilities of this pastorate. That’s certainly Peter, and if we are honest that’s each of us as well. All of us fail, all the time. We just choose not to think about it. The real question is this: What then? Given that you messed up big time, or he messed up big time, what then? Done is done, is it not? The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on. What comes after failure? Does Peter have any future in the business after his shameful behavior?

While we're talking about unlikely church leadership, let's not forget Saul, the Pharisee of Tarsus, the enemy of the church.

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

“Breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” is a good deal more serious than a discussion of doctrinal differences between men of good faith. Saul of Tarsus was a dangerous enemy of the followers of the Way, so much so that when he was stricken blind on the road to Damascus and laid, helpless, into the city Ananias, who was instructed by the Lord to go to him and restore his sight protested.

Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in

Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.

Great beginning for the new church we have here — a coward and a bully. Peter lies when he is scared and Paul does evil to the church. Yet, both are chosen by God to lead the church. Do you begin to get a sense of how differently we would deal with these two as compared to God's way of dealing with them?

We have such a terribly twisted idea of justice. For us, justice is no more than identifying wrong-doers and punishing them. Jesus did not punish either of these wrong-doers. He restored them to the roles they were chosen to fulfill. It is very tough for us to be comfortable with Jesus' approach.

One of the most surprising things I was ever told in Law School was when a professor pointed out that most of the time the people we call criminals obey the law.

They stop on red and go on green. They sit in the sun and watch the day go by. Many hold jobs. The things that cause us to label them “criminal” are a tiny fraction of their lives but the label becomes their defining characteristic. From our point of view, Peter’s cowardly abandonment of Jesus in His hour is his label. Those three denials and the cock’s crow define him just as Thomas is always going to be Doubting Thomas, even though he did come to believe. One “Gotcha” wipes out all “attaboys” and disqualifies you for any future chance of restoration. Jesus did not subscribe to our ideas of justice.

I’m convinced that my God did not breathe His Spirit into disposable, valueless people. I told you once about Shady Grady the well-known local car thief who saw an armed robber fleeing from the scene with the cash register tucked under his arm. Shady Grady tack-

led the guy and pinned him. The guy was screaming, “I didn’t do anything!” and Grady screamed back, “I’m a convicted felon. I know an armed robbery when I see one!” My God does not breathe life into valueless people. Everyone has a role to play in God’s creation. Sometimes, we go off the track. Sometimes we lose our way. When that happens, we tend to respond punitively. Jesus responds by reintegrating Peter into the fellowship and by turning Paul from the label of enemy of the church to his role as the first Apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus’ way has nothing to do with punitive response to bad conduct by Peter or by Paul. It has to do with restoration of them so that they can fulfill their roles in the coming church.

Remember, Jesus had appeared to the Apostles following the Resurrection and had given to them the Holy Spirit

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

The Holy Spirit dwelt within these men, and their role was to go forth into God's Creation. But Peter was stopped. Peter knew what he had done, and the other Apostles knew it as well. That which he had done was now blocking his way forward.

"I'm going fishing", Peter said. Well, he's a fisherman. That's his occupation. But notice that Thomas, Nathanael, James and John, and two others said to him, "We will go with you." Peter, perhaps, has some idea of returning to his earlier life, withdrawing with his shame alone. The other Apostles won't permit him to curl up in a lonely, wasted ball. They go with him. He is still

part of the community, though he has sinned. He's gone off the tracks, but he has been sealed as one of the Community by Jesus Himself. Peter doesn't yet believe it. "I'm going fishing", he says.

What did he catch? Nothing. Once the Holy Spirit was given him, his occupation as a fisherman was over. The only thing is, he doesn't know it yet.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Three times he asked him, once for each denial, each response by Peter canceling out one denial, each response freeing Peter from one of the chains that held

him back. In the 50 day season of Easter, between Resurrection Sunday and Pentecost, we are to direct our attention to the meaning of the Gospel accounts of what happened in Jerusalem some time around 30 c.e. What are these two accounts, Paul's experience on the road to Damascus and the Restoration of Peter, telling us?

Isn't Jesus counseling us to see God even in those who have failed? All people who draw breath are God's children and have a part to play in Creation. That's terribly difficult for us to see. We want to divide the world into the good guys and the bad guys. God works with all his Creation.

Pastor Edward Kemai, of Africa, reminds us

The Lord takes what looks like nothing and makes it into something we would never expect! He turns nobody to be somebody, victims to be victors. Prisoners to be great people. Nothing is too hard for him.

If we would follow the Way of Christ, we must keep that at the front of our minds.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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