

“Do You Love Me?”
Acts 5:29-32; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26;
John 21:4-19

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He is risen! He is risen indeed!

We know this response, and it's a wonderful way of acknowledging what God has done. However, if we had gone to Peter that first day and said, “He is risen,” what would he have said? I'm not sure he could have responded, or if he did respond, he wouldn't have known what we meant. That first Easter morning he ran to the open tomb. He went in, looked around at the empty tomb, and went away amazed. He went away trying to figure out what was going on. Why didn't he get it?

In our reading today, we hear that Peter has gone fishing and this is the third time that Jesus has shown up. That means now, at least twice, Peter has encountered Christ. That seems pretty incredible and I think it was. I think Peter found it incredible that Christ had risen. I'm just not sure that he quite knew what it meant. We've had thousands of years between that event and us. We've had some time to think about it. We know that this is an act of God that changed the course of history. This is an act of God that came to take our sin away. You might say Christ took sin down with him and rose with new life for us. He gives us the opportunity to know the fullness of God's grace. Why didn't Peter see that?

Peter didn't see it immediately. Why is he out fishing? He's gone back to his roots. If you remember, Peter was the guy sitting there mending the nets when Jesus came along and said, “Follow me.” Fishing was his profession, so now he was back to fishing. What does it mean? He knew Christ had risen. It feels to me like something was still in the way. He didn't think that he had a part of what Christ was doing. What might that have been?

Well, if you remember that Thursday night when Jesus had the meal with his disciples and instituted the Lord's Supper, after that meal Peter said, “I will follow you to prison and to death.” And Jesus said, “No, you won't. You will deny me three times before the cock crows.” Remember what happened later that night? While Peter was in the courtyard, he denied he knew Jesus three times, and then the cock crowed. Peter knew what he had done. He had denied Jesus.

I think Peter had this vision of becoming a rabbi, a teacher like Jesus, following in Jesus' footsteps and becoming a leader of the movement that Jesus was creating, but now he had denied him three times. I don't think he felt like he had a part of what was now happening. His guilt was still there. It formed a barrier for him.

Peter had been to the tomb and seen the cloths lying there. He knew that Jesus wasn't there. He knew that Jesus was not bound by death. He knew that God had sent Jesus because of his love for the world, that this love had been dead and buried, but it wasn't

gone. He knew Jesus was back. He knew that love of God was let loose on the world. I'm just not sure he believed he had any part of it. He had denied Jesus. It feels to me like the one who was still bound up was Peter because the guilt he felt was still there. I think he understood what happened.

Now, Jesus comes again. It's clear that Peter loves Jesus. Immediately on seeing Jesus on the shore, he jumps in (well, not immediately—he puts his clothes on first which always seemed strange to me), but he jumps in the water and swims to see Jesus. He loves Jesus, but he knows his guilt. What changes Peter's life? It is the encounter with the risen Lord. As Jesus comes to Peter and says, "Do you love me?" those three words are full of grace for Peter. Do you love me? Three times Peter gets to respond, counteracting those three times he denied Jesus. It's Jesus' way of saying "It's no longer in the way. It's not there." Peter's encounter with the risen Christ is what begins to change him.

I believe that's what begins to change us all. It is the encounter with the risen Christ. Love is not gone and dead, it is alive and among us. God in Christ is present and with us today and we encounter the risen Christ as well. We may not go to the empty tomb or the upper room or meet him along the Sea of Galilee, but somehow into our lives are spoken those words we need to hear. Somehow into our lives that moment of grace appears. Now, if we are at all like Peter, as I know I am, we might not recognize it. Notice by the third time, Peter is getting a little frustrated. "Why are you asking me again? You know I love you!" That wasn't the point. The point was that he felt guilty and needed to work through it. He needed to know that it was Christ that was setting him free and that guilt need not be in between them.

I think it's the same for us. How many times does Christ have to come into our lives with some form of grace to help us see the wonder of the new life he brings, the grace he wants to share with us? I suspect it's more than once. It may come in different forms. For Peter, it came around a fire by the Sea of Galilee. For us, it might come through the Word we read, the Word we hear, the prayers we offer, the community in which we recognize the love of God. It may be in the act of grace someone gives to us that we recognize Christ's presence. I believe that gift is given us—the risen Christ is in our lives. The grace of God is given us. The love of God is there for us.

It's easy to recognize what's wrong. This is Christ's gift to us: we are forgiven; we are loved. We can live into that and be changed. I don't think it was until Peter met Christ at that moment in those three questions that his life was fully turned around. It was a turning point for Peter. Then all of Easter makes sense—the grace of God, the gift of God's love that is resurrected in Jesus Christ. It makes sense after encountering the risen Christ. It is only then that, with Peter, we can say, "He is risen. He is risen indeed." Amen.