

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.

Easter III – April 14, 2013

Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond Virginia

## **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 Jesus 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 disciples 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."

Scene 1: He awoke in the hospital, with tubes and IVs everywhere. At first he could barely remember what his own name was, much less, what had happened. But all too soon it came back to him, in frightening clarity. He'd been drinking. He'd been driving a car with his friend in the

passenger seat. He'd lost control. His friend was dead. He was alive, if barely. Upon recognition of the reality, his next thought was, "I wish I had died. I don't know how I can go on."

Scene 2: South Africa under apartheid...this man was part of the police apparatus, designed to instill fear in the population. He helped put a tire around the neck of another man, douse him with gas, and light it. As this innocent victim burned to death, the policeman and his co-workers cooked their dinner nearby, on a grill. This policeman had lost his humanity, was in hell, and he didn't even know it.

Scene 3: The day started out as any other, as this family of four woke up, had breakfast together and headed out the door, the two children to elementary school. Life changed forever when the call came, shots fired at the school. The parents rushed to the school, found one of their children alive, if shaken, but their other child, did not survive. It was as though the sun fell from the sky and an eternal darkness descended. How could they ever make sense of this.

I could go on, you too, have stories to tell, some of them your own, personal stories, of those burned over places in life, where it seems like light and life itself collapse into a black hole, never to emerge again.

Such times and experiences are a part of life and always have been. We can see them in Holy Scripture and with the people we meet there. In today's gospel, we meet our dear friend Peter. He had his ups and downs.

We can learn a fair amount about Peter in the pages of the NT. Matthew has a number of stories, for instance. There we learn that Peter was a fisherman, and that he was so taken by Jesus, that when Jesus walked by and said, "Follow me." Peter did so without hesitation.

Peter was in the boat when Jesus was walking on the water and was bold enough to ask, "Let me walk out to you on the water." And Peter sets out, only to let fear take over, and sink.

Peter is the one who said to Jesus, "You are the Messiah." Peter also said, that suffering can't possibly be a part of this. Which, of course led to Jesus rebuking Peter in the strongest possible terms, "Get behind me, Satan."

Peter was there at the transfiguration later he was the one who asked, "How often must I forgive my brother who sins against me." Peter also asked, "Lord we've left everything. What are we going to get in the kingdom."

In John's gospel, Peter is the one who says to Jesus, "You shall never wash my feet." And when Jesus insists, Peter asks with great power and humility I think, then not my feet only, but all of me, my hands and head. Peter was in the garden with Jesus...and...at this critical hour or prayer...he fell asleep. When the arrest happened Peter was the one who cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, with a sword.

And of course, in John and in Matthew, Peter says he is willing to die for Jesus. He says, even if everyone else falls away, I will not. Jesus tells him, "Before the cock crows you will deny me three times." And so it happened...and Peter went out and wept bitterly. Matthew says. It was one of those burned over places, one of those dark time. Jesus was killed. There was no chance to make amends. Peter's final act, was denial...or so it seemed.

There cannot be a darker moment than late in the day on Good Friday. The Messiah, the Son of God, the Suffering Servant, the healer, the teacher, the preacher...the light of the world, according to John, had come into the world. What had the world done? Extinguished it. The one truly good person was snuffed out.

And yet, resurrection was coming...against all expectation and hope. Peter would see Jesus again, as resurrected Lord, and Jesus asked him three times... "do you love me" and Peter could say, three times, "Yes, you know I love you." Those three affirmations were healing moments and reversed Peter's course. He was no longer the one who denied Jesus three times, but the one who, in the end, proclaimed his love and obedience, three times.

And as the story moves forward in the New Testament, we read about Peter's amazing efforts. Tradition has it that Peter was ultimately killed for his faith...crucified upside down, at his request, because he did not feel worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus. Whether or not that story is true, it does witness to the reality of transformation and new life in Peter, beyond his moment of despair and fear.

Now, on the Great Last Day when all things are made new, the faithful shall be raised up, body and soul. But that resurrection power has already been unleashed. In faith, we have access to the power of Christ to bring life out of death now, to bring light where there is darkness now.

The person in the hospital who had driven drunk, was able to get sober and gave his life to stopping drunk driving and to help others get sober before they did something like what he had done. When he died, many years later, he had saved countless lives.

The policeman in South Africa, confessed his sins publicly and asked forgiveness from the family members of the person he had so egregiously murdered. And in so doing, he was able to reclaim his own humanity.

The parents who lost their child to gun violence, bravely lobbied the government of the United States to pass laws in the hopes fewer innocent people will be killed by guns in the future.

In none of these situations is the reality of the horror erased or excused. But meaning has been found in the suffering, and with the meaning has come new life.

So you see, there is nothing that you have done which will put you outside of God's grace.

There is no evil which has been visited upon you which is beyond God's love.

Tell yourself this truth and tell others too.

Resurrection, new life is always part of what God speaks in and to the darkness. It is yours in faith.

Open your arms and your hearts... let go of all that is keeping you from embracing God's promise of new life. Embrace life, resurrection now. And may others look at you, and believe in the power of God. Amen.