

## Two Questions

During this season of Easter, this time after the discovery by the women who came to tend to the body of Jesus that the tomb was empty and the recording of various post resurrection appearances of Jesus to disciples it seems that our focus is on the aspect of believing that the Lord is risen. What aspect about the experience led to belief among those who had known him—the seeing of the risen Lord---the seeing of the marks of his suffering evidently still present? That Jesus had risen was something that had to be seen to be believed was evidently needed for those first disciples. Yet it was clear that Jesus' expectation was that it would not continue to be so. Jesus tells Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus is anticipating a future group of disciples who will never have known him during his time as Jesus of Nazareth. Not only that, but even in this first set of appearances, it seems that the Lord has an agenda for these disciples beyond just establishing that he has risen. He tells them in John 20: 21—"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." It seems that for Jesus there is something more important at stake; there is a purpose for the resurrection which involves the completion of the task that Jesus was given. In that passage from last week we find a key to understanding this agenda which Jesus proclaimed throughout his ministry: to bring the kingdom—the reign of God near. Within the two passages which were read this morning Jesus asks a question. In the passage from John's gospel there is a narrative which takes place back in Galilee. Seven of the disciples have left Jerusalem and it seems that they are about to return to their previous lifestyle. They have come home. The time that they have spent traveling the countryside with Jesus is in the past. Simon Peter announces, "I am going fishing." The others join him and as would be the custom for fishermen, they spent the night fishing. But they caught nothing. Not an auspicious beginning. Then just after daybreak as they are returning to shore, they see someone standing on the shore. The text has already told us twice that this is the risen Jesus, but that these disciples don't recognize him. Jesus tells them to cast their nets to the right side of the boat, and echoing another story about a night of fishing, they do so and the net again becomes so full they cannot haul it in. John's gospel always has layers of meanings, some of which have been lost in the history of the community which developed around the leader of that community. Examples of that are the references to the disciple whom Jesus loved and the competition between him and Peter. Exactly who the beloved disciple was has long been debated, but here it is he who first recognizes Jesus and it is Peter who jumps into the water to swim to shore. For the Johannine community that detail was probably validating, for the message for us, it is a matter of interest to some scholars. What is more important is what follows. When the net full of fish is hauled ashore, despite being so full of large fish, the net is not torn. Additionally, there were one hundred fifty-three fish. Going back to the use of symbolism in John's gospel this account is a re-enactment of the calling of the disciples with an enhancement. The disciples are being sent out to gather people into the nets of the Lord---the nets will not be torn---and at that time there were one hundred and fifty three known peoples in the world. As their risen Lord has told them in Jerusalem—"As the Father sent me, so I send you." Jesus then invites them to come and eat breakfast, giving them some bread and fish he had prepared for them on a charcoal fire. After they had eaten, Jesus says to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" This begins

a question and answer session with Peter which is often interpreted as Peter's redemption for the three times he denied Jesus in the courtyard. Because, although the question Jesus asks Peter varies a little bit, it is basically this: "Do you love me?" And that is the first of the two questions I had in mind for the title to this sermon. It is a question I think Jesus asks each of us. Not, do you believe in me. But do you love me. Because, it seems that according to this text, if we answer yes, then Jesus has already a task for us. When Simon Peter said to Jesus, "'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." In the three times Jesus repeats this question to Peter with Peter's consistent response of Yes, Jesus responds with: "Feed my lambs, Tend my sheep, Feed my sheep." In other words, continue the ministry which I showed you when I walked among you---heal, restore, care for all those who have needs. The second passage which was read today contains a different question. It is also an account of a post resurrection experience, but a very different one as it happens not only after the resurrection but after the Ascension and Pentecost. Those are not the only startling differences, this appearance is not to a disciple, but to someone who not only doesn't believe in the resurrection but believes those who are followers are heretics. From the vantage point of some two thousand years of church history this story is well known but the effect that it had on church history and development cannot be understated. The passage begins with Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee who watched Stephen being stoned to death, seeking authorization to go to Damascus and inquire in the synagogues there whether or not any there were followers of the Way. The earliest follower of Jesus used that terminology to refer to themselves, they were followers of the Way and had the teachings of Jesus to guide them. So Saul wants to go to Damascus, seek out these folks that he thinks of as heretics and bring them bound back to Jerusalem before the Council for punishment. Although the text doesn't explicitly say he got the authorization, it tells us that Saul is traveling along the Damascus road and as he approaches Damascus his journey is interrupted. "Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice from heaven saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'" Of course, since no one sees Jesus, this is not exactly an appearance. But when Saul asks who is speaking, the voice self identifies, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." The encounter on the Damascus road is just the beginning of Saul's conversion. He is blinded and spends some time in prayer before another disciple of Christ is sent to him and the conversion is completed. But it seems to me that this is another question that Jesus has asked that we need to consider and place in conversation with the question with that first one. Question one: Do we love Jesus more than these? If in our answer we are not tending, feeding, caring for all those of the world, then does question two apply to us? Are we then among those who are in some ways persecuting by not following the ways, the teachings of our Lord? Although it is not in our texts today, in the scene from Matthew 25 which is called the judgment of the nations there is this phrase used as the groups are separated: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." or "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me." Two questions for us to consider this Easter season as we look into the empty tomb and consider how we are to proclaim the good news of the resurrection. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.