

## Two Life Changing Encounters

Our lectionary readings this morning gave us two post resurrection encounters; one about an event before Jesus' ascension while the other occurs after that...probably several months to a year later and is the last actual sighting of Jesus' physical presence recorded. The gospel narratives vary greatly in the extent to which post resurrection experiences are recorded. Mark records none; stopping at the sight of the empty tomb with the discovering women fleeing in terror and amazement after being given news of the resurrection; telling no one. Matthew gives us women worshipping at Jesus' feet, receiving a message to convey to his disciples saying Jesus will meet them in Galilee; but then only records the ascension with its giving of the Great Commission. Just like the birth narratives vary greatly so do those narratives describing Jesus' post-resurrection meetings with his disciples...those to whom he desires to convey the continuation of his mission. Within Luke the women discover the empty tomb and are given a message that Jesus is alive but do not see him themselves. Then their message is not believed. Luke then narrates two post resurrection appearances of Jesus in chapter 24 which happen on that first day. Some unnamed disciples who leave the city encounter Jesus on the road to Emmaus, not recognizing him until he breaks the bread in front of them before a meal. They then hurry back to the other disciples who are discussing the "tale" the women have told them when Jesus appears among them in a locked room. He commissions them as witnesses who are to go out into the world with his message after the Holy Spirit comes to them. They then go out of Jerusalem with him watching as he ascends into the clouds. John's gospel as we now have it spends much more time with the risen Lord; as do his disciples. On the day of resurrection described in Chapter 20 Jesus not only appears to the women that morning but to the gathered disciples minus Thomas the Twin that evening. Again the first news brought by the women is not believed. Then because Thomas also failed to believe the testimony of the eleven, Jesus appears again a week later. That chapter ends with John's statement that Jesus made many appearances to his disciples and others, but gives no details concerning them. This statement seems as if it is meant to close John's narrative about Jesus. But then there is another chapter of 24 verses which also ends proclaiming many more things could be added. Biblical scholars believe that chapter was not part of the original document so we are left to wonder why it was added—what was so important about its content that was not covered by the general statement and the content found before it. There are several aspects, different in their focus which have been lifted up over the years about this final chapter's content. Chapter 21 begins by taking up the story just after Jesus has appeared to the twelve—the second appearance when Thomas was present. Within John's gospel, Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit by breathing it into them at this point....not nearly as dramatic as the arrival described by Luke which we know as Pentecost with flaming tongues and strong winds...but this encounter had an important impact just the same. It was just after this that Peter announced he was "going

fishing.” When he said these several of the disciples spoke up saying they would join him on his “fishing trip” back to the Sea of Galilee. In the synoptic gospels, that is where Jesus first found many of them...and fishing was their occupation and livelihood until they left their nets to become “fishers of people.” In order to start a discussion of this text a Sunday school class was asked why they thought Peter and the others are recorded as leaving Jerusalem to “go fishing on the Sea of Galilee.” If this was reported before their resurrection encounter it could have been in despair, but knowing Jesus was resurrected that should not have been it. The response given by a class member was that they went to hide from Jesus; to hide from a possible reckoning for their actions before the crucifixion...Peter had denied him and the others had deserted him...so they went home to the place before they had first met him. Much of this text echoes previous interactions...they had not been successful in their night’s fishing before meeting Jesus the first time but when they obeyed his instructions to try one more time by casting nets over the right side of the boat the catch was so abundant the nets begin to fail to hold it. Here again after an unsuccessful night, responding to instructions from someone they failed to recognize, they are rewarded with a net so full they could not haul it in. Even the abundant catch of 153 fish did not cause the net to tear. Much has been said about the specific number of caught fish because it corresponded to the total number of known groups of nations and peoples at the time. The writer of John was a great user of symbols. Symbolically the early Christians were being reminded of their commissioning to fish for all people. When Jesus is recognized he is described as standing on the beach waiting for them to come ashore. Jesus asks them to bring one of the caught fish to have for their breakfast; he has a charcoal fire waiting and after preparation, he gives them bread and fish to eat. Again, it is the breaking of bread they truly recognize him. After they eat, as Peter is again sitting by a charcoal fire much as he did the night Jesus was arrested. Here the text records a conversation between Jesus and Peter which Jesus begins by asking: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” This begins a repetitive question and answer exchange with little variation in either according to our English translations. Yet because the Greek has three different words for that single word in English we miss some of the nuance of the exchange. Jesus’ use is asking for agape love from Peter—and from us. When we imagine Jesus asking that question of us, I think we may think there is an error in the text. We can see how this might be a question for Peter who after declaring absolute devotion, denies even knowing him within such a short time span that night...but in our minds the question does not seem right as addressed to us. In spite of our failures to be faithful disciples, in spite of our confusion about what it means to be Christian, in spite of our prideful presumption that we are our own creator of who we are, in spite of our sins...Jesus is supposed to love us. Isn’t that the message of our scriptures...especially the gospel accounts: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” Shouldn’t this text be reassuring us of Jesus’ love for us, not asking us for our love? When Peter responds that he does indeed love

Jesus, the love he offers is philos—the love which describes brotherhood or friendship. Not exactly the same thing as sacrificial love which Jesus offered and gave. The love that Peter can actually offer may not be agape love, but in this exchange Jesus accepts it. Jesus accepts us as we are so there is no need to pretend that we are perfect—though we may aspire to it. Jesus accepts that we cannot always love as he loves, but God’s love for us is crucial for what we take to be our fundamental task as Christians. That is, because Jesus first loves us, we must and can love one another. Our love for one another is crucial for our “showings”, our testimony to the world. It is the case that because we have been loved by Jesus that the love we show in response is not restricted to other Christians, to others like us. Again, even those who don’t believe note that God’s love for us makes possible our love of the world and all in it. Christians love the outcast, the unlovable, the destitute, those ravaged by illness and pain. They even love their enemies. At least that is the way it is supposed to be. In this Gospel passage, Jesus asks Peter “Do you love me?” three times and after each affirmative response that Peter gave, Jesus gave him a task: “Feed my sheep, tend my sheep”. Because of Peter’s three denials of Jesus before the crucifixion we have a tendency to restrict this exchange to Peter; to the process of forgiveness and restoration of Peter into the community which he was to lead; where he was to be the rock upon which Christ built the community. But in this conversation there is a message for us; a message that we too are given tasks which are to show our loving response to the love we have been given. We are all called to “feed and tend the Lord’s flock” which is very large as it does indeed include all peoples. We are called to “tend”, to care, to respect and value and try to see that all basic needs are met. That’s a simple task on the surface, yet it is one that will take all the love we have to give. No doubt the tangled relationship that Jesus had with Peter is reflected in this passage, but just as it is surely right that all that Jesus is and does manifests God’s love for us, it is also no less true that Jesus asks us, as he asked Peter, “Do you love me.” The second encounter which was described in Acts 9 on the surface is very different. Saul/Paul was not a disciple of Jesus. He was a member of the Sanhedrin the council which had condemned Jesus; he was a man convinced he knew God’s will and was dedicated to its purity. This meant he was violently opposed to this new movement which seemed heretical to him. So, believing he was obeying God’s will, he persecuted those who belonged to this movement. On the road to Damascus to continue this persecution, he has an encounter with the risen Lord—one that blinds him. He is also asked a question by Jesus: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul responds much like Moses before the burning bush—“Who are you?” The reply is: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do.” It is important to notice two things here: Jesus did not say the believers who were following the Way were being persecuted, but that he himself, Jesus was being persecuted. Persecuting others persecuted Jesus. The other thing, in this encounter Jesus tells Saul he will be given a task. Throughout scriptures, encounters with God always result in the receiving of a task. Saul’s task is to convey the truth

of Jesus' message to the known world; Peter's task was to tend God's people. The message from us from these two recorded encounters is to answer Jesus' question "Do you love me?" and then go out into the world recognizing that Jesus' image is found in all the people of the world who are suffering—and then we are to care for and tend to their needs. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.