

Easter 3 (C)
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Text: John 21:1-19

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During these first weeks of the Easter season, we get to hear some of the stories of how the risen Jesus appeared to his first followers after the resurrection. And while we might not meet Christ for a breakfast of fish and bread on the beach, these stories are suggestive of how we do experience Jesus, not just as a figure of the past, but as One who is present to address us and who calls us to follow him. For our journey of faith, Christ might make himself known to us in prayer or silence. Maybe through the meal of Holy Communion Christ will touch us with his healing and comforting power. Or through the words of scripture we might get a glimpse of how Christ is leading the way for us into a life that is beautiful and meaningful, and how he shows us that not even death will be an obstacle for God's love.

The first thing that speaks to me from this story about breakfast on the beach is the mysterious quality of Jesus' appearance. At first, the disciples didn't know it was Jesus at all. And even after one of the disciples said, "It's the Lord," there's still something very unusual about this interaction. When Jesus invited them to join him for breakfast, he says that none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was Jesus. It's so strange. I mean, I've never felt like I needed to ask any of my close friends, "Who are you?" What do you think it was about the disciples' experience of the risen Jesus that caused them to even think about asking, "Who are you?"

This part of the story really resonates with me. Even though I spend a lot of my time with the Bible and wrestling with Jesus' words, Christ himself remains beyond my grasp. It's not just that I can't summon Jesus to answer my questions or solve my problems. The risen Christ is alive and present in a way that is different from the life we know now, so a relationship with Christ is different from how we know each other. Sometimes it's a bit like the hymn we'll sing in a few minutes, "He Comes to Us as One Unknown." The second verse pictures Christ making himself known "when souls in silence lie and thoughts of day depart; half-seen upon the inward eye, a falling star across the sky of night within the heart." I hear in those words something that sounds like how I experience Christ present through imagination and ritual and silence, or through words of scripture that come back to me with surprising force, or through experiences of awe or love or vulnerability. In those moments, Christ is not in the past or at a distance, but a living presence. I wonder how you would describe your experiences of spiritual life. When have you felt Christ present to give comfort, or strength, or clarity?

The second part of this story that speaks to me is the emotional honesty of Peter's response to Jesus' questions. In the background, hanging like a dark shadow over Peter's relationship with Jesus, was what happened the night Jesus was arrested. Peter had declared that he would be faithful to Jesus to the end. He would even die with Jesus. But under pressure, Peter denied even knowing Jesus. I don't think Jesus needed to hear Peter apologize or state how he loved Jesus. But I do think that Peter needed to hear himself say it. The only way for Peter to move toward healing and restoration was to deal with that painful past. So Jesus asked Peter three

times, “Do you love me?” And Peter answered three times, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” It must have been agonizing for Peter, but Jesus didn’t do it as punishment, but to close the door to the past and open a new door to a new future.

Peter’s affirmation of love is so beautiful, and it reminds me that Christianity only makes sense as an expression of love. I wonder whether Peter’s honesty might challenge us to be similarly honest about our love for Jesus. I find that singing is one of the most powerful ways of feeling that love. When we sing, it can evoke awe and wonder for the beauty of creation, and gratitude for the gift of life and for God’s generous providing in the abundance of creation. Singing can make me aware of God’s grace and mercy and forgiveness, especially how God welcomes me and makes room for me as I am, and how God’s non-judging embrace is what helps me shed oppressive expectations of perfection. When I sing, joy and praise and thanksgiving all sort of blend together as expressions of love for God and love for Jesus. I wonder where you connect most to the feeling side of faith. How do you say, “Lord, you know that I love you”?

The final part of the story that speaks to me is how Peter’s expression of love toward Jesus led to a calling, to Jesus saying to Peter, “Follow me.” Jesus used the image of a shepherd caring for the flock to picture the sort of role Peter would have. Peter would have a very specific part to play in caring for the community of Jesus’ followers. I think what goes unsaid in the story is that this calling is Peter’s purpose in life. In the community of God’s people is where Peter finds a life that matters, a life that means true happiness, even if it also means hardship and trouble. And while the life that Jesus is calling us to may look very different from the shepherding role he called Peter to, I think that the same two things are true for us as well. Our love for Jesus is where the energy for being God’s people in the world comes from. Our love for Jesus is where our compassion for neighbors in need and our commitment to justice comes from. Our love for Jesus is what defines and enlivens our life together. And being God’s person in the world—in what ever compassionate, justice-seeking, life-serving way we are each called to—really matters for the world. This poor, suffering world needs you to embody Jesus’ way of love. Being God’s person in the world, however it is you use the gifts God has given you to serve God’s purposes of forgiveness and reconciliation and community, that also is your path to a life of meaning and true happiness. I wonder when you’ve felt Christ’s call to follow him in God’s work of healing for the world. Maybe you felt that call as an inner tug to respond to some need or problem. Christ’s call can also come when people you respect, or your church community, says that you have gifts that are needed for serving God’s purposes. I wonder how you’ve heard Christ saying, “Follow me.”

In our gospel story for today, Peter’s heartfelt expression of love for Jesus, followed by Jesus’ call to “feed my sheep,” all happens in just a few lines of text. I wonder, though, in our lives, whether we experience this engagement with the risen Jesus as something that happens over the course of years, over our whole lives. Jesus’ compassion toward us allows us to fully be who we are as God’s person, not encumbered by any burden of the past. We can joyfully embrace the freedom of being God’s people, so that our eyes can be open for how neighbors need us to be people who express forgiveness and generosity, how Christ invites us to share his work to push for justice in the world, to seek the flourishing of the whole human family, not just the

privileged few. How many years does this kind of transformation take? It takes time for God's love to break us free from a sad little me-first life, to liberate us from the grip of greed or shame, to open our eyes and hearts so that we know our worth is not based on our achievements or possessions but on God claiming us as God's beloved children. How could we not say, "Jesus, you know that we love you"! I wonder where that love will take you, and what joy and purpose it will lead you to find. Thanks be to God. Amen.