

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER, C  
Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)  
Revelation 5:11-14  
John 21:1-19

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Today's gospel reading reminds me of a certain fresh, clear morning high up in the Rocky Mountains. It was the very last day of a church camp for youth -- the "sending-off" day. We roused our campers out of bed just as the sun was rising. The air was crisp-cool, the grass wet with dew. We walked them down a mountain path to a clearing near a stream, and there beside the stream was a charcoal fire.

Around the fire, several people acted out the story we just read from John's gospel. Jesus appeared, risen from the dead, and told the disciples to cast out their nets for a huge catch of fish, then called them to join him for a meal. There Jesus firmly but kindly questioned Peter: "Do you love me?" "Oh, yes, Lord, you know that I love you!" "Then tend my sheep." After acting out the story, the campers were invited to sit down for a breakfast feast and talk about what this scripture could mean for their lives.

Over the years, I've sometimes wondered why the planners chose to present this particular story on the last morning of camp, just before everyone went home. But now I see that really this is a sending story. It's about new beginnings. It belongs to the early morning world of sunrises and new days and fresh starts. Through this passage, God gives us what we need to begin again in God's love.

It's similar to a much earlier story in Luke, when the disciples were first called to follow Jesus. There, too, Jesus commanded Peter and his friends to let down their nets and haul in a huge number of fish -- then Jesus declared: "Soon you'll be fishing for people instead!" That was the start of their adventures with Jesus -- but this story comes at the end. Which makes all the difference where Peter is concerned.

Peter is not feeling nearly so bright and clean and innocent now. There were times when Peter was absolutely brilliant as a disciple. He became the leader of the twelve. He was the first to call Jesus "Lord!" When Jesus came walking across the water, Peter was the only one bold enough to step out and meet him. But there were other times too.

Now as Peter meets Jesus beside that charcoal fire, Peter has to be remembering another charcoal fire that flickered in the courtyard of the high priest's house, just before Jesus was crucified. If Jesus ever needed his friends to stand by him, it was then. But Peter chose to save his own skin. Peter laid low. Every time someone asked if he knew Jesus, Peter said "No." Three times Peter denied his teacher and Lord.

Now, in the early morning by the lakeside, those three terrible denials stand between Peter and the risen Jesus. A barrier of guilt and shame that Peter cannot cross. And it is so beautiful that Jesus doesn't wait for Peter to speak to him. Jesus goes to Peter first. Jesus speaks without blaming, without reproach, without dredging up the sins Peter feels so guilty for.

Jesus simply invites Peter to begin again. Three times, "Do you love me? – Lord, you know that I do." Three words of love wipe away Peter's three denials, they set him free from shame and bring him back to Jesus' side. And Peter experiences a whole new life opening up before him. A crisp, fresh morning, a clean, new start.

But there's more. Not only does Jesus give Peter his life back—he also gives Peter *something to live for*. "Since you love me, Peter, then I invite you to love the people I love." Feed my lambs, tend my sheep. Jesus gives Peter a high calling, a purpose, a meaningful task. What a privilege for Peter to be invited back and trusted -- in spite of it all -- trusted to tend others, to give care, to nurture others as Christ's representative.

In fact, feeding Christ's sheep did become the central focus of Peter's life. Peter became the head of the church in Jerusalem for 15 years. After that, Peter set out as a missionary and went as far as Rome. Peter did love the early Christians well and he took care of them with all his might. He persevered and preached Christ through truly dangerous times, and in the end Peter even gave up his life for the faith, as our scripture predicts.

What a powerful gift it is, to be given a fresh start! To have the opportunity to begin again in God's love. To renew your love for Christ and be invited into a new path.

We all need this. Because isn't it true that our faith – like Peter's -- is not nearly as fresh and rosy today as it once was. Like Peter, we have in our own ways failed Christ, time and again, made mistakes, caused hurt. I'm sure there is no parent or spouse or daughter or son who has not known the need to start again. And when we hear Jesus forgiving Peter, we know God forgives us too. Jesus doesn't demand we be flawless; Jesus only asks that we be honest enough to admit our flaws. We don't have to be perfect, only willing to become new through forgiveness and to let God help us begin again.

A couple I once knew taught me something about this. They'd been married almost fifty years, and they had not been easy years, either. There'd been trouble with the law for one of them. There was problem drinking for the other, and depression, even attempted suicide. This husband and wife were by no means perfect, and neither was their family life. But when that 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary came around, they were clear that they wanted to

renew their marriage vows in church. They knew they could not have survived those 50 years without God's forgiveness and grace working in their lives.

I saw the fruit of faith in them. For in spite of all their struggles—or really, I think, because of their struggles— these were truly servant people. They knew how to feed Christ's lambs and tend God's sheep. They cared especially well for elders who were homebound, and for people who were hungry in the community. Anyone who looked closely at their lives would see they were disciples very much like Peter. They were very far from perfect -- just as all of us are far from perfect. But they were forgiven people leaning into Jesus' forgiveness, and sharing the Easter love that had been shared with them.

When that husband and wife walked down the aisle at their anniversary celebration, they were saying, "Not what WE have made of our life together, Lord, but what YOU have made of it." When they renewed their marriage vows, I saw them also renewing their vows of faith. Publicly thanking God and publicly recommitting to follow in the way of new life.

The Risen Jesus gives you and me the same opportunity this morning. To renew our vows of love -- not marriage vows, but vows of faith, through worship, praise, and prayer. Today we have the opportunity to give thanks to the Risen Lord who gives us yet another chance, renews our relationship with God, and leads us further down the path of a life that serves goodness, peace, hope, love, and justice.

"Do you love me?" Christ asks us. "Yes, Lord, I do love you." What an opportunity we have, to say it again, and know that in the fullness of who we are, God loves us. Broken as we are, deniers that we are, God loves us, God accepts us, God forgives us.

Something in Christ's eyes shines on us today, to say: *You are mine and I love you, now and always, no matter what.* Jesus entrusts us with that calling to "Feed my sheep, tend my lambs, share the love I share with you, however and wherever and whenever you can." And I wonder what that will look like, for you, for me, for our congregation, our neighborhood, our nation.

Because every morning is a morning God opens fresh before us in Easter love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.