

Sermons at Christ Church

Love, Re-Imagined

Easter III

The Rev. Emmanuel A. Mercer

“For what am I to myself without You, but a guide to my own downfall? Amen.

I don't think I fully understood what his death meant. The last time I saw him was on a hot summer afternoon with my little brother. We had walked from home to the hospital to see him. And on his death bed, we shared with him the news that we had been accepted into boarding school. With all the strength that he could muster, and a deep sense of joy that was palpable, he made the sign of the cross. Standing by his bed, we could tell how proud he was but then how painful it must have been to know that he couldn't in his present state walk with us into the future he had so designed for us. That was the last time we saw him alive. The joy on his face stuck with me. In my little mind was the age old question, do you love me? The joy on his face answered that for me.

I don't think I fully grieved his passing. I still live with the pain of his passing. I often have my what if moments, and I wonder what my life would have been like. I wonder how my relationship with him would have been like. I look back with utter sadness at a life that I never got to live, a relationship I never had with a father I loved so much. Truth is, there wasn't any avenue for me to go through any grieving process should I have desired one. It could be that like me, you may be grieving about a loss that happened long ago but the scares are still fresh. It is also possible that the loss happened not quite long ago but the grief has been impossible to overcome. In spite of when it happened, there's always a deep sense of loss, one that we may never be able to overcome.

Loss creates emptiness and a void in our lives. And often times we try all kinds of different ways to fill them up. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned during the Second World War, wrote a letter to his parents on Christmas Eve about the depth of emptiness and why God doesn't fill those emptiness. He writes “There is nothing that can replace the absence of someone dear to us, and one should not even attempt to do so. One must simply hold out and endure it. At first that sounds very hard, but at the same time it is also a great comfort. For to the extent the emptiness truly remains unfilled one remains connected to the other person through it. It is wrong to say that God

fills the emptiness. God in no way fills it but much more leaves it precisely unfilled and thus helps us preserve – even in pain – the authentic relationship. Furthermore, the more beautiful and full the remembrances, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy. One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain.”

It isn't surprising therefore that the disciples went back to their former trade because like each of us we like to fill up the empty spaces in our lives. They knew what had happened. They have seen the Rabbi who was crucified and died. But the question is, what do we do with this new reality? The Lord is no longer in the tomb, yes, but what are we to do with the story?

Meeting Jesus by the Sea of Tiberias, harkens back to the first time Jesus met Peter and his brother Andrew by the Sea of Galilee and promised to make them fishers of men. Here by the Sea of Tiberias, the fishermen again encounter Jesus, not as one they did not know, but as one they knew, one they broke bread with, one who washed their feet, was crucified and died, but is alive and present.

We may not be able to tell how empty or how deep the void in our lives may be until we meet the risen Christ at the shore, on the road to Damascus or wherever. And when we do, he refuses to leave us just the way we are.

He invites us to launch our nets again for another catch-to reach far deeper than we thought we could. He invites us to a meal he cooked for us. Just so we may be filled with his fullness. And his question has always been the same: Do you love me? We may deny him as many times as Peter did and more, but then the question that comes back to us over and over again is, do you love me?

Saul didn't know the depth of his emptiness, until he met Jesus on road to Damascus. And by his own actions thought he could determine the future by the controlling the present. He forgot that the desire to control the present only highlights our emptiness and the void in our lives.

His encounter with Christ exposed him to the reality of a risen and living Christ. If he thought that those he persecuted were proclaiming a myth, now he's come face-to-face with the person who embodied the story. Saul was no longer dealing with an idle tale by a bunch of fishermen, he was now dealing with a transforming reality. And in the process, he touched his own emptiness and disillusionment.

To understand Saul as one untimely born and unfit, and one to whom Christ revealed himself, is to understand the intensity of this encounter with the risen Christ. The improbable story of Jesus showing himself to Saul authenticated the message for which he was persecuting others, and affirmed for him that Jesus was actually present and alive in the life of the community. This was his conclusion, this savior cared enough about me that he chose to reveal himself to me. And then he asked me that same old question, do you love me? Follow me.

How possible that the Savior would reveal himself to me? How possible? The psalmist captures for us the sum total of Saul's joy and our joy when he says, "You brought me up, O Lord from the dead; you restored my life as I was going down to the grave" I was on my way to the pit. I was blinded by intolerance. I was dead. And then on my way to the pit you rescued me and gave me life. "Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing, O Lord my God, I will give you thanks for ever."

To understand Peter's passion and Saul's zeal is to appreciate that our emptiness and disillusionment is cured not simply by our desire to fill them up, but because Christ chooses to reveal himself to us. And any such encounter is one where we can no longer remain empty or disillusioned. The question remains the same, do you love me? And if the answer yes, Lord you know that I love you, then we follow as disciples.

And those who follow as disciples care for all the sheep, tend all the sheep and feed all the sheep. They are not preoccupied with the what ifs of our world. What if we all worshipped the same God? What if we all ate the same food? What if we all looked the same? What if we all had the same complexion? What if we all loved people of the opposite sex? What if? The what ifs of our world only feed our emptiness and nourishes our disillusionment.

Easter. The power of the resurrection is one which provides a new lens by which we look at the world in a totally different way. Easter acknowledges that God did not abandon or surrender the earth but reconquered it, and gave it a new future and a new promise.

Through the power of the resurrection we come to know of God's new creation-one that invites all to breakfast and dismisses none from his Supper. Easter's promise is one where God reveals Himself to us, fills our emptiness with his presence, and then asks us the same old question, do you love me?

It is said that when Ananias laid hands on Saul, scales fell off his eyes and he began to see, not from a blinded sight, but through the prism of the new future and promise of God's creation. May those same scales fall off our eyes so we may see the glory of the risen Lamb, answer yes to the old question, and then follow as disciples.

Amen.