

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter – May 4, 2025**  
John 21:1-19

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Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. After spending Lent and Holy Week trying to make sense of the cross and what difference it makes for us two millennia down the road, we now are left with the equally daunting task of making sense of Jesus' resurrection. It would not be nearly as daunting if Jesus were still hanging around in the flesh, if he had never ascended into heaven and instead remained to lead the church in its mission of sharing his good news. If he had done that, we could have avoided a lot of conflict in the church. There would have been no argument in the early church about the inclusion of Gentiles, no split between the eastern and western churches in the Middle Ages, and no Reformation, because Jesus would have been able to sort out the issues and bring the opposing sides together. But that's not what happened, and we have to make sense of that too.

Each of the four Gospels, together with the rest of the New Testament, is in one way or another attending to this task. We saw last week how Luke dealt with Jesus' first encounter with his disciples after his resurrection and how they could not make sense of his resurrection or even experience this new reality without being led through the scriptures by Jesus and then breaking bread with him. And that, of course, is what lies at the core of the church's practice – gathering around Word and Sacrament to be reminded of God's promises of life in Jesus' death and resurrection and to be filled with Jesus' very self in the bread and wine of holy communion. This is how risen Jesus makes himself known to us, Luke wants us to know, and how he continues to be present with us.

John does something similar in the Thomas story, which we didn't hear last week. But you know the story. Jesus appeared to the disciples as they were hiding behind locked doors. He breathed the Holy Spirit on them and charged them with a mission of forgiveness. But Thomas wasn't there when that happened, and when the disciples tell him about it, he doesn't believe them. He needs to see and touch Jesus for himself, just as they had. And that's what I was imagining for us when I started my sermon. But as I also said, we don't get that. What we get is the story, the message that John wrote down so that we who cannot see and touch Jesus as Thomas and the other disciples did would nevertheless come to believe and trust in him, and have the life that he came to give us.

Our readings today continue this thread of helping to make sense of Jesus' resurrection, and I want quickly to touch on each of them. The first is our Gospel reading, which is kind of John's second ending. Or maybe not even John's, but an epilogue by somebody who wasn't happy with where John left us at the end of chapter 20. Maybe this person didn't like it that Jesus does not meet the disciples back in Galilee as he promised in the other Gospels. Or maybe it was Peter's denial that still weighed heavy. Was that breath of the Holy Spirit and the mission of forgiveness really enough to deal with what Peter had done? So we get a new version of a miraculous catch of fish like the one found in Luke chapter 5, which serves as Peter's call story there. Peter and his companions have been fishing all night with no luck. But Jesus tells him to put down his nets again and he pull in an enormous catch. And this causes Peter to recognize that he is the presence of someone holy, and *that* makes him aware of his own sinfulness. I think this epilogue in John is a direct reference to that, and it leads into the dialogue with Peter, "Peter, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord." "Feed my sheep." Three times, for the three times Peter had denied

him. The writer of this epilogue wants us to be sure of the mission Jesus gives his disciples. If Jesus can forgive Peter, then we too can forgive one another.

There is something similar happening in our first reading from Acts in the story of Saul who becomes Paul. Saul is an enemy of the early church. He's on his way to Damascus to arrest some of Jesus' followers, when he has an encounter with Jesus. But here's the thing. This is the ninth chapter of the book of Acts, and Jesus ascended into heaven back in chapter one. The full name of this book is "The Acts of the Apostles," and that's because it is about what happens *after* Jesus leaves them. But here Jesus is, showing up on the Damascus road to confront his enemy, Saul. But he has not come to destroy him, as we might expect in the stories we tell, and as we maybe fantasize about dealing with our own enemies. No, Jesus comes to forgive even his enemies and to turn them into friends. The man charged with dealing with Saul after his encounter with Jesus is a man named Ananias, whose name means "God is gracious." Ananias is reluctant to have anything to do with Saul because of what Saul has done to his fellow believers. But he is called to live up to his name, to be conduit of God's grace. And in his care, Saul receives his sight, and is baptized and takes a new name, Paul. This is how the risen and ascended Jesus is to be known and experienced in the world, in the uncomfortable work of reconciling enemies by God's grace.

Finally, we have that second reading from Revelation. Revelation, as you know, is a strange and difficult book that in some ways seems to contradict everything I have just talked about. There is not a lot of forgiveness to be found in the Book of Revelation. That is not its strong suit. But the church over the centuries has relied on this book for assurance that in spite of all of the difficulty we face in this life, particularly the difficulty of following Jesus in a world that is so opposed to him, a world that uses Jesus' name to promote the exact opposite of what he is all about, that in the end our journey of faith will not have been in vain, no matter how things may seem right now in the midst of difficult circumstances. This passage is where we get some of the words we just sang at the beginning of the service. "This is the feast of victory for our God... For the lamb who was slain has begun his reign." And the four living creatures who say "Amen" at the end of our reading the church has connected with the four Gospels. If you back up a chapter, you'll find a description: each has the face, respectively, of a human, a lion, a bull, and eagle, which we connect to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And while I'm not entirely sure what the author of Revelation intended, the church has taken this to mean that in the four Gospels we have an ongoing, living witness to Jesus' death and resurrection for us and for our salvation.

The takeaway then for us in these readings is that God in Jesus is still in the business of seeking out ordinary sinful human beings like us, in the midst of our faithlessness and opposition to God's mercy, grace, and love, and stopping us in our tracks, forgiving our sin, and reconciling us with God and one another. Jesus' death takes away the sin of the world, and his resurrection is the beginning of new and better life. It opens the way of turning enemies into friends, hate into compassion, despair into hope. We live going forward trusting that because Christ is risen, love conquers evil, compassion conquers sin, and life conquers death. And we joyfully share that faith and that hope, in word and in deed, with the world God has so loved in Jesus, because Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)