

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 5, 2019
Third Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 9:1-19
Psalm 33:1-11
Revelation 5:6-14
John 21:1-14

This season of Eastertide is about celebrating change and transformation. It is wonderful to see the change and transformation all around us in nature, as the earth springs to life again from its winter of death. And of course, this change from death to life is most fully embodied in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In two of our lessons today, we see powerful encounters of persons with the risen Jesus. In one case, we see Saul of Tarsus who is blinded while on the road to Damascus. In the other, we see Peter, John, Thomas, and others as they encounter Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

What do these encounters with Jesus say to us this morning? I believe that these encounters with the risen Jesus have at least two things to teach us.

First, whatever else Christian faith may be, these encounters remind us that Christianity is first and foremost about *relationship* with Jesus, and not just a system of beliefs -- what Wesley called “a train of ideas” filling our heads. Christianity, at its heart, involves a genuine encounter with Jesus Christ.

It was not a philosophy, a set of ideas, or a conceptual scheme that called Saul and struck him blind on the Damascus road. It was the Lord Jesus who called Saul.

It was not a 10 volume set of theology that appeared on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and made the disciples an early morning breakfast. It was the Lord Jesus, the risen Christ, who appeared to them.

Whatever else Christianity may be, it is first and foremost about Christ. It is about personal relationship with Christ. It is about communion with Christ.

But look further at these stories, and notice the pattern. Evangelical Christians often speak of “coming to Christ,” or “finding Christ,” or “accepting Christ.” But as these stories show us, it is theologically more precise to understand that we don’t “find” Christ -- Christ finds *us*. We do not “come” to Christ -- Christ comes to *us*. The only sense in which we find Christ is in response to his relentless pursuit of us.

Francis Thompson, in his poem *The Hound of Heaven*, captures beautifully Christ’s wondrous love in pursuing us. The poet describes something that many of us face when we are confronted with the claims of Christ on our lives. He describes himself *running from God’s love* in Christ because he sees Christ as a lover who will strip him of everything else in life that is good. He says:

*I fled him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;*

*I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter,
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong feet that followed, followed after,
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat -- and a voice beat
More instant than the feet --
“All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”*

[Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*; quoted in *The One Year Book of Poetry*,
compiled and edited by Phillip Comfort and Daniel Partner]

Christianity is about relationship with Christ. Which leads to a second truth from these scripture lessons to us this morning. And this truth is truly Good News. It is simply this: *When we make mistakes and do harm to our relationship with Christ, he seeks us out in order to heal us and to restore us.*

Our Gospel lesson finds the disciples out fishing, perhaps because they did not know what to do with the *risen* Jesus any more than they knew what to do with Jesus *before* his death. So they find themselves doing what they were doing when Jesus first appeared to them and called them to be “fishers of men” -- they are fishing. They find themselves in the same “boat” (!) they were in when Jesus first called them -- they are literally “out to sea.”

But Jesus won't leave them that way. *He comes to them.* He seeks them out. He won't let their mistakes, their denials, their confusion, be the last word. He comes to heal and restore them.

And so it is with us. You may be here today and you may be thinking, "I've failed Christ so many times. I've rebelled against his Lordship. Like Peter, I've denied his love more than once. And like Saul, I've gotten carried away in my own misguided zeal for things that were not of God." And in the midst of that reality, you may wonder: *Is it possible that God still loves me? Is it possible that God in his love could forgive and restore me?*

We know the answer to this question. Just as the risen Christ invited those disciples to a meal of fish and bread on that morning, so he invites us here today to a meal of bread and wine. And in this meal he invites us truly to encounter him in all of his love and grace. He bids us come, that he might restore and heal what is broken in us.

Christianity is first and foremost about relationship. And the relationship is one where we are those who are *sought*, not the seekers. And we are sought because God's love for us is relentless, because Christ wants to heal us and restore us, and to make himself known through our love of one another and a world in need.

As we come to the Table this morning, let us come with gratitude that the One who sought Saul of Tarsus and the One who sought Peter, John, Thomas and the others, is the One who is here in this place, seeking *us*. Let us open ourselves to his loving presence. And let us go forth from this place willing and able to “feed his sheep.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.