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Easter 3 Series C 2016

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Third Sunday of Easter – April 10

The world is pretty well done with this Easter thing, but Christendom is chugging right along with this theme. Last week we might have wrestled with the intellectual and faith challenge presented to us by the resurrection. Jesus complimented us on our faith, calling us blessed. Today we will begin to assess just what it means that we live in the kingdom of the resurrected King Jesus. Our archetypes today are Saul the Persecutor and Peter. What can we say about Peter? He was denying, foolish, buffoonish, and impetuous Peter.

The text will speak of transformation in both of their lives, but we have to remember that neither of these will be transformed into other people. Peter won't be suddenly transformed into a fellow of common sense for us today. In fact we will see him launch himself over the side of a boat, fully clothed. But he will in another sense be transformed by this King Jesus. Restored after the colossal failure of his betrayal in the courtyard of the High Priest, he is commissioned to care for Jesus' lambs. Persecuting Saul, on the other hand, will still have his hard edged moments. Just read his letter to the Galatians, especially 5:12 where he wishes the circumcision crowd would just go ahead and cut the whole thing off. It was not one his more charitable moments, but then the whole letter is rather that way. Paul was a guy who was always a man of some temper. The white-hot persecutor of Christians became a white-hot Christian.

To be a citizen of the resurrection kingdom is to be in a kingdom of second chances, a kingdom in which the lost are found, the losers are picked up from the wrestling mat of life and given a spot on the track team. Redirected, re-equipped, God uses some pretty strange people in his kingdom. For all of us, that should be a message of hope. There is room in that mighty host, that great crowd, for the likes of you and me. His kingdom truly is more a hospital for sinners than a hotel for the saints.

It is perhaps the second reading, the reading from the amazing Revelation of John which gives us a clue to this amazing thing which the resurrected Christ has done. John, weeping because the book of life cannot be opened and death must then reign unchallenged, is comforted to see the Lion of Judah, a lamb who has been slain, take his place on the throne of heaven. The sins of Paul and Peter and you and me are no longer sealing it up.

And then the circle of those singing God's praises grows and grows. First are the mighty hosts of heaven, then the circle grows to include every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, even the lonely prisoner sitting in some dismal dungeon, they are all there, all singing the praises of the Lamb who slain and has begun his reign. These are the ones that God sees. It is interesting that God sees only the one's singing. It is as if the evil is completely off his radar, it cannot be seen by him, it would simply compromise his serene joy.

How will this resurrected King rule in our midst today? How will that kingdom of heaven break into this moment and this place? We have concluded our prayers all year long with the words, 'who lives and *reigns* with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.' Or words very much like this.

What is our king about today? Where shall we encounter his gracious reign as he lifts up this fallen world? How shall he quicken our joy and strengthen our gladness?

Another themes which runs deeply through all the readings is persecution. With recent events in the Middle East and the destruction of whole communities of Christians, it might be time to talk about this. As of today, I am reading that the Indian Roman Catholic priest who was supposedly crucified on Good Friday may still be alive and the report may be an error. Please be careful if you are thinking of going this way.

Collect of the Day

O God, through the humiliation of Your Son You raised up the fallen world. Grant to Your faithful people, rescued from the peril of everlasting death, perpetual gladness and eternal joys; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The address of this prayer, the simple “O God,” is followed by the description of the passion event and its intended effect upon the world. Through the humiliation of Jesus, God has raised up the fallen world. The lowering of Christ has raised the world brought low by sin. There is some deep theology there. Remember that God’s name is also what he does; there is no distinction between the essence and the deed of God. To know his name is to know him and his work. We can have a façade, there is no such thing with God.

In this prayer we note God’s great act of salvation, and note that we have been saved from everlasting death, yet we pray that he would grant us perpetual gladness and eternal joy. It would seem rather obvious that we should be happy about what God has done, but it has by this time been two weeks since the bright feast of Easter. The candy is all eaten, the baskets are stored for another season, and the Easter lily we bought at Wal-mart is probably shedding a few blooms by now. The stuff of life has long since interposed itself upon our Easter joy. We don’t even get Easter Monday off anymore.

Perpetual gladness, eternal joy? That sounds a little presumptuous. I might be glad to have a week’s worth! But that is exactly what we pray for here, and we should expect that these readings will redefine life and joy and gladness for us. The life which is lived Easter may look very different than we expect, or then again, it might just feel different, and the reasons we do the things we do might be the greatest change of all.

Readings

Acts 9:1-22

Today’s reading is the conversion account of St. Paul in Acts 9. This story is retold by Paul in Acts 22 and 26 in two speeches that he makes there. Interestingly he makes some critical additions and changes to this account. For instance, by the third retelling the character of Ananias is missing completely and all the things that Ananias said are now in mouth of Jesus. If

you are tempted to make this a significant part of your sermon, you probably want to look at those too. But while you are looking at them, don't forget the first two chapters of Galatians and II Corinthians 12 in which Paul himself makes references to these events.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. ²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

If you do the math on the time line presented in Galatians 1 and 2 and build that on the fact that Paul had to be in Corinth sometime in the year 51, Paul's conversion took place within five years of Jesus' death and resurrection. I have a feeling that most people think that some considerable time took place between the ministry of Jesus and the call of Saul, not so.

Several things commend themselves in this text for preachers. If you are serving St. Paul Lutheran Church, you can hardly avoid this one. It is your congregation's namesake! This story of course has been repeated countless times in Christianity. The recent "Amazing Grace" movie might make a good reference here. But other stories, some much more recent also are of the great turn around. Jesus has not stopped calling sinners and those who work at cross purposes to his kingdom. Sometimes the most distressing folks make the very best preachers and evangelists. Chuck Colson of Nixon infamy and Prison ministry fame is a great example. But almost every congregation has the story of some man or woman whose life was transformed by this. I remember a really rough and tumble guy in the community where I grew up. He was a hard drinking, hard talking, and hard living guy. His only soft spot was for his daughter, a little girl named Laurie. He made the step to enroll her in the Lutheran kindergarten, not because he bought any that "Jesus stuff" but because it was the best school for his precious daughter. You can tell the rest of the story, I bet. The last I heard of this fellow, he was serving on the board of Trustees in my father's congregation and his daughter had graduated from Concordia, Seward, and was a teacher in a Lutheran school, a school just like the one that changed her and her father's life. This is the day to tell those stories. Resurrection comes in all sorts of different ways. As Paul said in Ephesians 2:1 "We were all dead in our sins."

If you have people who have had the "turn around" experience in your congregation, it might be a really good idea to preach this sermon for them. I think too often we get turned around and flop down in a comfortable pew and thank God that we are saved. But notice that here the man who is turned around is not turned around simply to be turned and then to stand still. Paul was turned around so he could be instrument of Jesus to the world. He was turned with a purpose. I wonder if the transformed folks in our parishes haven't heard the second half of that whole sequence.

The same Jesus, who did this once before on the road to Damascus for Saul, is doing this today.

We might also want to discuss the nature of that "turn around." Pilots who fly into a cloud bank without instruments, are instructed to turn around and fly out on the same course. Repentance is a 180 degree turn. For Saul of Tarsus it will mean a whole new identity as Paul the Apostle.

Another interesting point might be the presence of Christ which we also discussed last week. Jesus asks Saul "Why are you persecuting me?" Saul has been throwing Christians in jail, not Jesus. There is no indication that he was involved with the death of Christ. Yet, Jesus asks this question in which he says bluntly that Saul persecutes him. Of course, when you give so much as a drink of cold water to the least of these his brothers, you give it to him, the same works in the negative, the persecution one might wreak against the least of Jesus brothers is felt by him too. Does that suggest a little more circumspection in the way that we treat fellow believers? Does that suggest that our words or deeds in terms of the body politic of the synod and our own congregations needs to be marked with charity, love, and concern for one another because that is Jesus we are talking to?

Then, notice that the healing of Saul comes via the Church and its members. The appearance of Christ to Saul was Law, it blinded and destroyed. The healing would come through the ministration of God's people, Ananias specifically. This takes place in the context of baptism, of word spoken, of touch and fellowship. Does that say something about what we do? Have we at times thought we needed to be the Law when God has called us to speak the Gospel? It was hard for Ananias to see that. He could only see the persecutor and questioned Jesus command to minister to him.

I am also drawn to the figure of Ananias. Jesus asked him to go to Saul, and he really did not want to do this. "I have heard about this guy..." Ananias is a little like Jonah in that. Jesus has a mission for Paul, however. Many have found that prophetic mission to be really interesting. You wonder if Ananias did not have some mixed feelings when he saw the scales fall from Saul's eyes. Was he afraid that the old persecutor would see him and haul him off to jail on the spot?

And yet another possible direction for preaching on this text is the blindness/sight of Saul. Isn't it interesting that Saul needs to be blinded before he can really see? It is a little like the story of Jesus healing the blind man in John 9. There is a really strong Law/Gospel element on that. Saul is really devoted to God, he is hyper-zealous. And that is really the problem.

Where are the Sauls in our community? Do we see them as enemies or potential converts like Saul? Do we have the Ananias complex where we are afraid of them and don't want to talk to them, but need Jesus to tell us to get out there and visit this guy or gal? I know a man who won a dear and fervently devoted parishioner simply because he found her one day grieving over her dead dog and did not scorn that. She had been his enemy, but now was his friend, because he visited her and comforted her. How many enemies don't we needlessly carry around with us because we don't see them with Jesus' eyes?

Psalm 30

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up
and have not let my foes rejoice over me.

² O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.

³ O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol;
you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit.

⁴ Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints,
and give thanks to his holy name.

⁵ For his anger is but for a moment,
and his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

⁶ As for me, I said in my prosperity,
 “I shall never be moved.”
⁷ By your favor, O LORD,
 you made my mountain stand strong;
 you hid your face;
 I was dismayed.
⁸ To you, O LORD, I cry,
 and to the Lord I plead for mercy:
⁹ “What profit is there in my death,
 if I go down to the pit?
 Will the dust praise you?
 Will it tell of your faithfulness?
¹⁰ Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me!
 O LORD, be my helper!”
¹¹ You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
 you have loosed my sackcloth
 and clothed me with gladness,
¹² that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent.
 O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever!

Revelation 5:(1-7) 8-14

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, ⁴ and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵ And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
 and to open its seals,
 for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
 from every tribe and language and people and nation,

¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

This text is the second half of a very important part of Revelation. That means we should probably read the first half – that is chapter 4. I subscribe to the idea that John wrote this book as a retelling of the history of the world from seven different perspectives. Here John seems to be telling the history of the world from the perspective of God’s throne room. At the beginning, told in chapter 4, we hear of a modest group of beings that praise God for the creation.

At the chapter change, where we pick it up, John sees a scroll written on both sides, on the right hand of the throne and the one who sits on it. This will show up later in John’s Revelation. It is the Book of Life, on which are written the names of those who have been given eternal life. It is sealed up, presumably by sin. The names cannot be read, and unless the names can be read, eternal death is their lot. John weeps at this. But then, standing before/on the throne is the Lion of Judah, looking like a lamb who has been slain (this is some really mixed metaphor). He is able to open the seals.

The seals will be opened in chapters six and following which seems to be another retelling of the history of the world from another perspective. There John tells the story from the perspective of the earth.

For the rest of chapter 5, however, the picture is of an ever increasingly larger circle of people joining in the song. First the group around the throne sings, then the myriads of angels. Finally, the whole of creation, everything on the earth, under it, in the sea, etc., is singing this heavenly song, the four living creatures say “Amen.” It is the of the world.

A couple of things to notice here: First of all, the song. This is the now familiar “This is the Feast” which many congregations sing well. If you are not singing it this week, I would drag it back into the liturgy. This is the Easter song, and this is the season when one really should be singing it.

Secondly, notice that there are no bad guys in this picture. The demons are nowhere to be seen, there are no sinners, no discussions of those who persecute or otherwise oppose God. The only people on God's radar are the folks who are singing the song. From God's point of view, the others just don't show up. The rest of Revelation will make very clear that these evil doers and evil ones are real and that God does in fact see them, but for the purpose of this chapter, they are not there.

I think this is significant. The folks who are reading this are going through a persecution. To these Christians the soldiers and the folks who are persecuting them look so large, so big. But God only sees the folks singing the songs. For the Christian who is in the jail cell, the temptation is to think that God has forgotten them, he has abandoned them. John is saying that when we sing the song, we are the only one that God is looking at. The persecutors are the invisible ones, unseen, and unreal. The other important thing is that music is often the most memorable part of a person's faith. They can take away my glasses and my books so I cannot read, they can lock me in a cell by myself so I cannot talk to anyone, but I can still sing "Jesus loves me" or at least hum it until they haul me to the firing squad or the hangman or the lions, or a cross.

Is it any wonder then that the early Christians were noted for singing when they were being executed? I wonder if the bored people I see looking out the windows during the hymns and songs in church have any idea how important these songs are to the folks that were listening to these words of John. They understood that in praising God, they were right in his view. How would our worship be different if we thought that way?

The other element that bears preaching today is the idea that the circle grows and grows. It starts as the four living creatures and a couple dozen elders in a circle around this throne. By the end of this chapter, there are myriads upon myriads singing these songs. A myriad was the largest number in the Greek vocabulary. This is as big as they had words for. The idea is that this is a lot of angels, people, heavenly beings, and even apparently animals and creatures under the earth and on it.

Again, imagine the poor soul languishing in a prison cell or hiding in their home, wondering if the soldiers will come. The temptation is to think that one is alone. Have they all forgotten about me? Has God forgotten about me? Those who have gone through temptation speak of the Devil doing this to them, causing them to think this way. John seems to want to tell them that they are part of a mighty and marvelous host. I suppose that could be good news for a little group of folks who are sitting in a church this Sunday too, perhaps noticing how small and frail their assembly has grown. But it is not really small and frail. They are singing with angels and archangels.

This could be an amazing sermon on the power of music. We are not really persecuted like these people in John's audience, but the folks in nursing homes also feel really alone. Sing a song with them, and often the demented and the Alzheimer patient will perk up and start paying attention in a whole new way. John seems to be telling his people that when they sing, God is watching them, there are lots of places there that same message is beautifully sung and spoken today.

John 21:1-14 (15-19)

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." ⁶ He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

The number of fish found in the nets of the disciples has long perplexed readers of this text. There are some excellent and bizarre sermons from antiquity on this number. And perhaps it is with good reason. One of the participants in this study three years ago passed this along from his brother who is more mathematically inclined than either of us:

“I, too, have marveled at the exact number of the 153 fishes in the John text. Years ago, my mathematically minded brother pointed out to me that in terms of numerology, the number 153 is the most mysterious of them all.

Consider:

- 153 has three digits.
- $1 + 5 + 3 = 9$, or 3×3
- And the best of all... $1^3 + 5^3 + 3^3 = 153!$ ”

I pointed this out to my son, who went on to discover several other things about 153 for me.

- It is the sum of the first seventeen whole numbers (1-17)
- This then means that it also the seventeenth triangle number. If you think of every number as a point, you can arrange 153 points into an equilateral triangle with seventeen sides.
- But perhaps oddest of all, and I have not verified this, YHWH, the name of God which is usually translated as “LORD” occurs 153 times in Genesis.

I have not a clue what to make of this.

The little story starts out so normal. Seven guys by a lake, boats are there, the equipment is handy, and they used to do this for a living. “Let’s go fishing.” It just sounds like something guys would say. Of course, if I was involved, the fruitless night spent fishing would also be pretty normal as well. I spend a lot of time fishing, but not much catching.

The word that Jesus uses for the men on the boat when he calls them is somewhat interesting. It is “children.” It could have been simply a guy calling from the shore or it could have meant much more. Suddenly this stops being normal at all. These guys do actually know how to fish, and they are overwhelmed by what happens. The nets are full. As they are struggling to haul this bounty onto the boat, it dawns on John just who it is who is standing on the shore shouting instructions to them. It is Jesus. Again, Jesus is recognized in the miracle, in the fish. Remember that Luke tells us in chapter 5 of another time when Jesus did this miracle of fish in the nets in the middle of the day. John says to Peter “It is the Lord!” and Peter leaps over the side of the boat and swims to shore.

I have this picture indelibly imprinted on my mind from the Archbook, Peter vaulting over the side of the boat, fully clothed, his sandaled feet just about to hit the water. Jesus some distance off. It was a great story, well told by CPH. I read it hundreds of times when I was a child. Looking for a good gift to give to your Sunday School classes at the end of the Sunday School year?

You can imagine why Peter jumps over that boat, and it seems John wants you think of this by the later treatment of Peter. Peter has denied Jesus very visibly. Why does he want to get to shore so quickly? It could be that his joy just overcomes him. It could be for something else. I have always thought that Peter wanted a moment alone with Jesus just to say “I’m sorry.” Sorry for that whole denial thing, sorry I was such an ass about everything. The prior appearances of Jesus have always been in the group. Peter hasn’t had a moment to be alone with him, to say that private, “I’m sorry.”

We don’t know what Peter and Jesus talked about, but when the others start to have trouble with the fish because they are so many, Peter single handedly hauls the whole lot into shore. Something happened there that energized him, gave him superhuman strength. When Jesus sends him to do a task, he leaps right into it. Does your congregation have a problem hauling in the fish? Could it be because we have a pile of unresolved sins at home that we have not really dealt with? What are we waiting for? Jesus has risen from the dead just to forgive those sins!

The breakfast meal, again food! Is this the prototype of all men’s bible/prayer breakfasts or what? Being good Jewish boys, this did not involve ham, bacon, or sausage to be sure. Jesus is revealed to his disciples in the context of food again. I cannot think this is accidental. He has eaten with them and it was in the breaking of bread that the Emmaus disciples saw him for who he was. It would seem that John and the Gospel writers want us to see that Jesus resurrected can be found in a meal. You don’t have to think real hard about which meal I am talking about. Paul, in I Corinthians speaks of the “Maranatha” the Christians speak at the Eucharistic meals of the first generation of Christians. Maranath means “come, Lord!” Do you pray, “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest..?” There is a mystery of the resurrection to be encountered at that rail. We partake of a body and blood broken and shed at Calvary, but it is also the resurrected and living Christ we meet there.

Then Jesus restores Peter, three times, once for each betrayal. Much has been made of the fact that the word for Love changes here. Jesus asks “agape” love, and Peter responds “philos” love and then the last time Jesus asks “philos” love. I am not sure we should make too much of this. First of all, Jesus would have spoken in Aramaic which did not have all these distinctions. But more importantly, even the ones we have here are hard to make sense of. I have read several attempts. I think it is important to note that the distinctions in the different kinds of love have been highlighted in the recent decades, perhaps out of proportion to what John might have known.

In any event, Jesus restores Peter, he now has the task of feeding Jesus sheep. Like Paul, Peter is given a solemn charge which involves going out to take care of the beloved of God.

The last part is just bizarre, I don’t know what to make of that! Peter died as a crucified man, if the tradition is correct, hanging upside down outside the city walls of Rome, to satisfy the

insanity of a mad emperor named Nero. But he would feed Jesus' lambs, and in a very real and tangible way, he followed Jesus.

The building depicted here is the Tempietto. It was designed/built in the renaissance by Donato Bramante. It sits on the flanks of the Janiculum in Rome because it marks the spot where they thought Peter had been martyred. Most scholars doubt that placement today, but this little building continues to stand as a testament to the piety and impact of Peter's martyrdom some 1500 years after the event.



Law and Gospel

1. I am supposed to be happy in this season of Easter – but the world is intruding into my joy. The pressures of job, finances, family, health, and more are distracting me from this Easter joy. I need someone to reinvigorate my “happy” and Jesus does this through his gentle, and persistent love for me. I falter, he does not.
2. My life has run off the rails at a number of points. I may feel this acutely, or I may simply be numb to it, but in ways great and small, my life has erred. Like Peter I have denied Christ with my life. Like Saul, I have at times actively and intentionally harmed the body of Christ, like John’s persecuted audience, I have sometimes been the victim of forces outside my control. The effects are largely the same, I find myself lonely, isolated, angry, fearful, or beaten down all the same. Jesus has come to turn my life around, he may take hard and difficult action or simply stand on the shore and bid me jump in a lake, but he comes because the train wreck that is my life is still and always precious to him.
3. Restored to Jesus’ good favor by his gracious act, I am prone to sit back in my pew and just stare at him. It is selfish and self-centered of me. Christ has not turned my life around so I can be cozy with him. Christ has purposefully turned me about. But Christ comes today, potently, gently and sometimes not so gently providing me with purpose, filling my nets, opening my blinded eyes, empowering my song.
4. By myself I am simply miserable at filling Christ’s mission. Like Peter I am afraid, like Saul I am prone veer seriously off course and actually work against Jesus. When powerful forces move against me, I am helpless before them. But Jesus authorizes Peter and gives him His love. He redirects Saul and empowers his new message. He cheers and makes solemn promises of his presence and care to the persecuted people who read John’s Revelation.

Sermon Ideas

1. Worthy is the Lamb! (Revelation – that the hearer would see Jesus and rejoice in him and his love despite the problems of life.)

Definitely want to sing “This is the Feast” if you are considering this sermon.

This sermon will carefully consider the picture of Jesus that John gives today, but wants to connect that picture to the life/situation of the hearer. John is portraying Christ this way because he is offering comfort to a persecuted audience. Our personal “persecution” may be experienced in different ways, but the comfort offered translates to a variety of situations.

The overarching message of John’s chapter 5 is really the heart of the Christian Gospel – Jesus, the Lamb who has been slain and now lives, has conquered sin and death. He did not only do so for himself, but he did so on our behalf as well. He is the Lion of Judah, the whole tribe. He is the sacrifice which has purchased us forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus can open the seals on the Book of Life and read there the names which are recorded, including your name, including my name. Every baptism inscribes another name on that scroll.

The second theme of the text and the sermon is then the community which is created by this all-encompassing work of Christ. He has not died for me alone, or for a few, his kingdom is huge, involving uncountable numbers of people, some of which are imperceptible to me, but nonetheless real for their imperceptibility. He begins with the throne room of God, with its strange angelic beings. But from there he moves out through the ranks and ranks of angels and heavenly hosts, including those who have died and are at rest in Christ. Finally he ends up here on earth and here we may want to slow down a little. Every creature, no one is left out, praises God. The things on the earth, under the earth, in the sea. The idea is that the Christian who has been isolated is isolated no more. The persecuted woman hiding in the basement is visible in this scene. God’s eyes are on her. But so is his gaze on the woman who lies imprisoned in an Alzheimer ward or the little congregation which is feeling very alone as it endures yet another funeral of a dear member.

The preacher will want to combine these two things. Jesus’ great act of rescue has bound us together with angels, archangels, sinners, saints, and all the company of heaven. Hum a little Jesus Loves Me, A Mighty Fortress, or Abide With Me and join that great host. Croak out “This is the Feast,” it doesn’t matter if you can carry a tune or not, and God is listening. He will weave your voice into the tapestry of heaven and join your song with mighty angels and the beautiful prayers of every saint who has gone before us.

2. Hauling in the Fish (That the hearer would encounter the resurrected Christ in both the forgiveness of sins and the divine commission to be the agent of God's grace to the world.)

Law –

- A. Most churches in North America are not growing.
- B. Those that are growing are not growing because they are making inroads into the community of the lost, but because they are transferring members from one church to another.
- C. This suggests a couple of things to me,
 - 1. there are a pile of disaffected members in churches who are moving around looking for something
 - 2. there are a pile of congregations that are not giving something important to those people.
 - 3. the people outside the church either don't hear the invitation or cannot because it is drowned out by the stuff that is bothering the folks on the inside – our invitation/evangelization is stifled by the fact that we have unresolved tension within the fellowship.
- D. This needs to change – lost people are still lost.

Gospel –

- A. Jesus forgives his friend/disciple Peter this is a resurrection of sorts – a resurrection for the sinner.
- B. The Lord prepared the breakfast for his disciples – the food for the journey.
- C. This empowers Peter to haul in the fish
- D. Christ also forgives us and empowers our words of forgiveness that we can speak to one another (see last week's reading in John 20)
- E. That empowerment and forgiveness given to us, frees us from the need to make all the scales balance
- F. That forgiveness lets us see every problem and person differently
- G. That forgiveness gives us the story and the message which continues to attract the sinners around the world.

It all hinges on whether we believe something really happens when we are forgiven and when we forgive. Ephesians might make a good place to start reading here. This capstone letter has some wonderful and amazing things to say to us. Paul envisions a church which is defined by forgiveness. You might read chapter 4 of Ephesians in that light, notice how he ends the chapter and begins it.

3. Another sort of resurrection (That the hearer would encounter the resurrected Christ in this day, and in that resurrection experience the newness of life to which Christ is calling him/her – our own Damascus road resurrection event.)

St. Paul is probably the most common name for Lutheran Churches in the US. We really like that moniker. I drive past one on the way to my son's music lessons. My sister in law teaches at another school run by a St Paul Lutheran Church. My prior parish was St. Paul Lutheran. They are everywhere!

Why do we love that name so? Is it not because we love what God did to a scoundrel this day? Saul was a monster, by his own admission, a persecutor of God's people. He was dead in his sins, a true and real death, in which all of us participate. You might read his descriptions of his old life in I Timothy 1 and Philippians 3 among others.

On that road to Damascus he encountered the resurrected Christ, but it was a terrible encounter. It blinded him, left him stunned and fasting. In the fearful and obedient Ananias, Saul would encounter Jesus again, but this time in grace. He would hear words of encouragement, he would be touched by the waters of baptism, and he would be transformed into the Paul after whom we name our churches.

We are probably familiar with the story of what happened next. Paul would become the great preacher of God's grace to the gentiles, that's us. That same graciousness comes to us today, and Christ has a mission for us his people. No, we don't deserve it either. We are not likely candidates any more than persecuting Saul was a likely candidate. We have spent too much time on ourselves and our own needs. We have neglected the Word of God, we have failed miserably as Christians. We are positively Ananias like in our fear.

But God still says to us today, "Go and tell."

You see, there were two folks who saw Jesus in this story, one of them was a terrible sinner, a persecutor of the faith. The other was a faithful Christian man named Ananias. The one encounter was blinding and terrible, but the other moved a fearful man to confront his enemy and become the very instrument of that man's salvation.

Jesus is out there right now in the car accidents and divorces, the cancers and the pink slips. He has a way of showing up in people's lives and stunning them into being ready to hear what he really wants to say. He is making the next Saul ready and he is sending us out of these doors with the simple words of encouragement and the waters of the same baptism which Ananias brought to trembling Saul. We are afraid to do this. Ananias was

too, but Jesus sent him anyway. We might not even want to do this, Ananias did not want to, but Jesus sent him anyway. He might not have been very good at it, but Jesus lent him His Holy Spirit, and the scales fell from Saul's eyes, and one of the greatest turn around stories ever told began that day in house on Straight Street. That story began because a humble and obedient man went and called another man brother. Notice that Ananias performed no miracle there that day. He simply called his enemy a brother, encouraged him in his need, and God caused the scales to fall from his eyes and God blessed the waters of Baptism that Ananias poured over his head.

Jesus promises you that the same Holy Spirit walks out those doors with you.

Children's sermon idea? Get a young man up front and put a blind fold on him and spin him around. Tell him that heaven is out the door to the narthex. He won't find it, but an Ananias could come and take him by the hand and lead him over there.

4. In God's Sight (That the Spirit of God would comfort and console the beleaguered Christian with the promise of God's loving care and attention.)

Usually when someone has me in their sights, we think of violence and death. A gun sight is the way we aim the thing. But Revelation will take this in a completely different way, a way we see going on in the other readings too.

John wrote to a beleaguered people. The emperor Domitian was insane and in his paranoid delusions he believed that the Christians posed a serious threat to him and his rule. Several of the local governors in Asia minor took the opportunity to act upon their own fears and mistrust against the Christians in their provinces. The result was a wide spread and fearsome persecution.

John wrote Revelation for these fearful people to make them less afraid. They were already afraid. Too often today we think of Revelation as frightening, and it does talk about frightening things, but it spoke of those things to people who were already afraid of them and John wanted to make them less afraid.

Today he tells them of how this situation looks to God in a sense. Ever since Jesus died and ascended to that heavenly throne, God's eyes have been firmly fixed on anyone who sings Jesus praise. His focus is so intense that he doesn't seem to notice the rest of the world. The things that afflict these poor Christians are almost unreal in this view. What is most real is God and the people singing this praise.

There are lots of things which are real problems which we face today. Jobs and families, health and conflict, all sorts of things combine to make us miserable. They are real, and I don't want to say that the pain they inflict is not real, but John wants to talk about something that is more real, more significant: God's esteem and love for you. John told his imprisoned and suffering people that if they could croak out a verse or two of "Jesus loves me" God had his eyes on them. Likewise, you who gather this day to sing the

praises of that same resurrected, living and reigning Jesus, have this same and beautiful promise from God – he has his eyes on you in love.

I don't know exactly what that means for the problems you face in the short term. But I do know what it means for them in the long term! The problems will not prevail. God's love will prevail. Your problems are happening because God has taken his eyes off of you. Indeed, his promise to you today is that he is looking intently at you, only you, through the loving lens of Jesus.