SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 3 (C)

Jesus Will Meet Us
[RCL] Acts 9:1-6, (7-20); Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

John's Gospel ends with four appearances that the resurrected Jesus makes to different groups of disciples: four scenes of Christ revealed alive, four assurances that death could never contain the life that Jesus lived and lives. First, on Easter Day, we heard how Mary encountered Jesus in the garden outside the tomb, and mistook him for the gardener, before God's light flooded in and she saw him revealed as her teacher. Last Sunday, we heard of two encounters with Jesus: late on Easter Day, Jesus appears to the disciples in the house where they had been staying — only Thomas is missing and does not believe. So Jesus returns again the following week, and this time Thomas is there, and sees with his own eyes, and confesses his belief. And Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed me because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

These appearances take place in Jerusalem, in the days just after Jesus' execution. The terror of the preceding week has dissipated, but Jesus' disciples are still filled with fear, not quite sure how to go on. They don't know what's coming next. John does a masterful job showing that fear transforms into joy. First Mary stands outside the tomb, weeping because Jesus is dead. And in the next moment she stands there weeping because he is alive. This whole section, John chapter 20, is imbued with a heavenly light. Think about how your memories of deep despair and deep joy seem more intense: your wedding day, or the funeral of a loved one. The picture you keep in your mind is brighter, more colorful, more deeply ingrained.

But then life goes on, and many ordinary days follow. So it is with the fourth and final appearance that John records, in chapter 21. Some time has passed — John doesn't say how much. But the disciples have left Jerusalem and returned to their home in Galilee, back to the safety of the countryside and away from those terrible forces that Jesus confronted in the city: the chief priests and Pharisees in the temple, and of course the Roman governor and his soldiers. Jesus' loyal followers are home, but you get the sense that they don't quite know what to do with themselves or what to make of those strange appearances that happened just after Jesus' death.

Peter decides to go fishing, and several of the others decide to go out on the boat with him. They don't have any luck, but the next morning, as they are coming back to shore, they find a man standing there who

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tells them to cast the net again, to the right side of the boat this time — and of course, the man is Jesus, and of course, they haul in so many fish that the net is nearly torn. And Jesus invites them to sit down on the beach, around the fire he has made, to break bread with him once more: from the last supper to the first breakfast, if you will.

This is the last appearance of the risen Jesus that John records. But this is not Jesus' last appearance. Look with the eyes of faith, and we begin to see Jesus in the oddest places: on the seashore, in the garden, on the street corner. Sometimes Jesus is hungry and cold and asking us for money. And other times he is inviting us to sit down for an unexpected meal. But always, always, Jesus is challenging us to live lives of kindness and compassion, of sharing and generosity, of justice-making and peace. In a word, the abundant life that Jesus has brought us is a life of love: it comes from love and is intended to bring more love into the world.

The English language has a poverty of words for love. We have to modify love with other words if we want to try and be precise about what we're talking about: we talk about "romantic" love, "familial" love, "brotherly" love, and so on. Greek does a better job of this, as we can see in the conversation that Jesus has with Peter after they finish breakfast. Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" And Peter answers him, "Well Lord, of course, you know I love you." But Jesus doesn't seem satisfied with this answer, so he asks Peter again, and Peter again gives the same answer. In fact, this exchange happens three times.

Now why would Jesus ask Peter this question three times? It turns out, in the original Greek, Jesus and Peter are using completely different words for love. What Jesus actually asks Peter is: do you *agape* me? And Peter answers: yes Lord, you know that I *philia* you.

Agape and philia. Jesus wants *agape*: the kind of love that is life-transforming, wholly consuming, that means commitment beyond feelings. *Agape* is the self-giving love that sacrifices its own needs for the good of others. The kind of love that God has for us, in other words. This is the love Jesus showed us on the cross, and Jesus is asking for this kind of love in return.

But all Peter can offer is *philia*: I have affection for you, Lord. I like you, well enough. That's what *philia* is — more like, than love.

We shouldn't be too hard on Peter though. Perhaps he was just trying to be honest about the kind of love he was capable of giving Jesus in return. Peter saw Jesus' brutal execution with his own eyes, so he is well aware of what can result from too much *agape* love. Letting go of yourself for the good of the other is not an easy calling.

A remarkable and beautiful thing happens at the end of this exchange though: the first two times Jesus asks the question, he says, "Do you *agape* me?" And Peter answers, "Lord, I *philia* you." But the third time Jesus asks, he changes the question and uses *philia* instead of *agape*, the same word for love that Peter had been using all along.

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Peter is hurt, perhaps because he feels embarrassed by Jesus' lowered expectations. But in reality, he has no need for embarrassment: the point is that Jesus loves us enough to meet us where we are. If all we can offer is *philia*, then Jesus will meet us there, and keep walking with us. Jesus knows that the *agape* love with which God holds together the universe is more than enough to go around: it can make up for our deficiencies in love. And as we walk with Jesus and our hearts grow more open, God's *agape* love will come pouring in, until we are so full that it begins to flow through us and out into the world. This is the abundant life that Jesus wants for us: will we follow him into it? Amen.

This sermon was written by ***the Rev. Jason Cox*** *for Easter 3 (C) in 2016.*

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