

April 18, 2010

The Third Sunday of Easter, Year C

John 21:1-19

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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There is a myth around many churches, and especially, it seems, around ours that the church year ends on Easter day. Maybe because the weather is so beautiful and people are outside more, or maybe released from the guilt of Lent people no longer feel the need to be here, or maybe lake houses are more appealing for the weekend, I don't know, but I sometimes get a little depressed about the season of Easter.

The message of the season is the most powerful one we have, that we are no longer held prisoner by anything, not even death, that we are loved despite our sinfulness and brokenness, that God has won over all... but so few of us are around to hear it.

The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus make nice stories. Nice stories with surprise endings, no less. But there is more to it than that. If all these stories left us with were warm fuzzy feelings about breakfast on the beach, there would be nothing upon which to build the foundation of our faith.

Later this morning, in Ellis Hall, we'll have a chance to hear Gail O'Day of Candler School of Theology talk about why the Easter season isn't just one day long, about the biblical texts that carry us through the great fifty days and beyond, into the whole year, into our whole lives.

There is a reason we need to hear these stories. There is a reason they need to be part of our bones, to inform our faith, to teach us how to live in the world. We are an Easter people. We are people of the resurrection. We need to know what this means and we need to know how to wear it like our skin, to breathe it like our air.

We are people of the resurrection. Stories like the one we have this morning teach us how to live into that understanding.

Our Gospel this morning starts in a familiar way. The fishermen were fishing. They hadn't caught anything all night and they had decided to pack it in, call it a day.

Then, just like on that day years earlier, when they were called to be fishers of people, Jesus again appears on the shore.

And just like that day years earlier, the fishermen did not know what they were dealing with or what they were getting into.

And just like that day years earlier, even though they hadn't caught anything all night long, they try one more time.

But this time it is different. This time, when they haul in a catch so big it strains their nets, they know exactly what has happened, who is here. They recognize what has happened.

And then off goes Peter.

Peter never quite gets it right. I've talked about him before. He is so eager-beaver, so over the top, kind of like the obnoxious little tag-along sibling or teacher's pet. He tries so hard that he usually overdoes it, as when Jesus was washing feet—Wash all of me Lord!—or when Peter swore that he certainly would not deny Jesus—not me, Lord, I will die alongside you.

Peter tries so hard and usually for all of his trying, he has missed the point of whatever Jesus is trying to teach. But Jesus knows Peter, just like Jesus knows the heart of each of us. Jesus knows the good there, the intentions there. Jesus uses Peter, the rock of good intentions and a noble heart, and builds his church.

Then in this story, Peter goes totally overboard. Literally! As if he can't figure out up from down or left from right, he puts on his clothes and jumps in, swimming to shore to see Jesus. The other disciples, also excited, row the boat with its huge catch in tow, to shore, not too far behind Peter.

But not Peter. He can't wait for the rowing. He can't think clearly enough to make a plan. In his enthusiasm and his devotion he just dives in and swims as if his life depends on it. And I can imagine the others watching from the boat, rolling their eyes. There goes Peter. Again.

Peter's *cluelessness* is not necessarily something we should model our lives after, as humans, after all, we are pretty clueless without having to work too hard at it. Just like Peter, we rarely get it quite right.

We find ourselves so excited by the birth story, attentive to the detail of each angel, each lowing beast. And then at Easter, too, so inspired by the ALLELUIAS that ring through the place, we recommit ourselves to God. And in the frenzy of lilies and trumpet fanfares, we mean it. Until life gets in the way again and the practice of our faith takes a backseat to the logistics of vacations, soccer games and groceries.

But again and again, like a weary but amused parent, God just sighs and tries again, helping us, like Peter, learn from our mistakes, loving us through it all, knowing that we, too, are the bedrock upon which the church is growing.

So perhaps Peter isn't exactly the model from which we should draw our life of faith, with his rollercoaster of understanding. But there is something to Peter.

There is something to be learned from him. Jesus, after all, knew his heart. Jesus, after all, knew that Peter was not just worth saving, but worth nurturing and forgiving.

What if we learn not from Peter's goofy inconsistency or lack of awareness but from his sheer enthusiasm for the Gospel message? What if we learn from Peter's eager and loving heart? What if when we realize that God is near to us, we don't know whether to get dressed or sit still, we can't bear to sit around rowing, we just jump in and swim, like an overjoyed retriever, and stumble over ourselves, soaking wet, mad with joy to be in the presence of the one who loves us so much that he would die and rise just for us?

Here's what might happen: When we are asked to feed the poor and hungry, we won't just fulfill our duty, we'll fill the pantry of Midtown Assistance Center with well beyond our quota of 300 bags of groceries AND we'll make a generous monetary donation to them as well.

When we are filled with the enthusiasm of Peter, when we are asked to furnish one apartment for refugees from devastated Haiti, we'll look around at our own abundance and furnish two apartments.

When Peter's spirit catches hold of us, we will look at the bottomed out economy and our own scanty checkbooks and we will still give *just a little more* to the church until our enthusiasm adds up to over 200 households giving to the annual appeal that is working to make the budget.

And when Peter's passion is our passion, we will again and again stand up with the families of those being baptized and say "we will with God's help" and "we believe."

Because, friends, we will. And we do. And we did.

We are once again signing ourselves up for a monumentally important task. We are promising together to raise these little ones to the light of Christ. If we go into this journey with them with the enthusiasm that Peter expresses in everything he does, if we infuse into these children that same unbridled spirit of YES PLEASE in the face of the risen Christ, then we will be bestowing on them the faith upon which God will continue to build the church.

Peter didn't always have the right answers, but he always had the right passion. Hold on to that passion and be the church.