

The Third Sunday of Easter
May 5, 2019
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Acts 9:1-20
Psalm 30
Revelation 5:11-14
John 21:1-19

Peter or Paul? Paul or Peter?

From a preacher's perspective, it's an embarrassment of riches.

We have such wonderful passages to choose from this morning. Both the reading from Acts and that "epilogue" from the Gospel according to John tell us of encounters with the Risen Christ. From the book of Acts, we hear the blinding account of conversion of Paul. From the Gospel of John, we hear of an encounter with the risen Jesus that fills the senses: the wet water, the early morning chill, even the smell of fish grilled on a charcoal fire.

I waffled between the two for much of the week. (I'm a winner either way.) But in the end, the birth of a baby decided it. So in honor of Peter Winston Knobel, born this past Thursday at 10:53 AM, weighing 8 pounds, 6 ounces, I'm going with the story of Jesus and Peter.

John tells us:

This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Well, yes, the third time in John's account ... if we pass over Mary Magdalene on the morning of that first Easter. Later that same evening, John says that Jesus first appeared to a gathering of the disciples. Jesus came to them as they met behind locked doors ... doors they had locked because they were afraid. This was the first time Jesus showed up as an unexpected guest.

A week later, Jesus appeared for the second time. Thomas, one of their flock, wasn't around the first time Jesus appeared. He said he'd need to see Jesus for himself. And so, the doubts of Thomas notwithstanding, Jesus came as the disciples met behind shut doors once more. That was the second time Jesus appeared as an unexpected guest.

Today is the third time. But unlike the first two times, we're not at all clear when it happened. All we can safely surmise is that this third time was some time later – perhaps considerably later – some time, in any event, after the thrill of those other times was gone.

For what strikes me is how blasé everyone seems to have become. It's almost as if all of the stunning moments we celebrated throughout Holy Week and Easter never happened. The disciples all take a look around and decide they've got nothing better to do than get back to doing what they've always done.

Even the dialogue is stultifying:

Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you."

And the night that followed was a remarkably unremarkable expedition. I rather imagine the night's fishing was nothing more than routine tedium:

Drop the nets. Haul the empty nets back up.

Drop the nets another time. Haul the empty nets back up once more.

Drop the nets yet again. And haul the empty nets back up again.

It was fruitless work in the end. Life lived in ordinary time, with nothing to show for it.

And so it goes. Even though they'd seen so much once upon a time, it's clear they didn't expect anything to intrude on their ordinary lives the morning after their long night of fishing.

And even when Jesus calls to them from the shore, they don't recognize him.

He tells them to cast their nets on the other side and, somewhat surprisingly, the fishermen give the landlubber the benefit of the doubt. I suppose they said to one another, or thought to themselves, "Why not? We've got nothing to lose."

And then they bring in such a haul of fish, so much that they can barely bring it in.

And they still didn't all immediately recognize Jesus. But one of them did and tells Peter.

What if he hadn't figured it out? Would they all have been content to take in their haul of fish, selling some in the market and taking some home for a breakfast they would have cooked for themselves? Would they still have gone ashore where the risen Christ waited for them or would they have given him a wave of appreciation and simply gone home their own way?

I'm struck by how easy it might have been for them to miss the point of what was going on that morning, simply because they weren't expecting anything special to happen to them that day.

But of course Jesus was always showing up in unexpected places, even before Easter. And of all the disciples, Peter is the prototype to make the point. Peter often comes off as a bit a cartoonish figure, but it's not fair; he's really just a stand-in for everything ordinary.

Right from the start. When Jesus first began calling disciples, he took one look at this fisherman and called him Cephas, which is Aramaic for Peter, which is Greek for Rock! (John 1:42) Now maybe Jesus could just tell there was something special about him that others failed to see, something solid enough to carry the weight of a church built on his shoulders. I suppose that's the traditional notion – that Jesus knew him better than he knew himself.

Or maybe Jesus was never looking for anything exceptional. If that's the case, he found the perfect exemplar of everything common in Peter.

Peter is the one, time and time again, who boldly confesses something about Jesus and then badly falters. It's Peter who dares step out of a boat to walk on the water, then sinks like a rock. It's Peter who answers Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" with "You are the Messiah, the Son of God." But then he rebukes Jesus for failing to be a typical sort of Messiah. And it's Peter who, on the night Jesus is betrayed, promises to remain true to the end, no matter what, but then denies being a follower of Jesus three times before the cock crows the next morning.

But I don't think any of that makes Peter exceptionally oafish. To the contrary, I think it makes him entirely ordinary. These are the failings that make him most like any of us.

I say all this to underscore the point that (even before Easter) Jesus was about the business of unexpectedly intruding the sacred into the midst of everything ordinary.

And so it is this "third time that Jesus appeared." Peter – along with the others – was just trying to get back to living an ordinary life. I can well imagine he might even have come to terms with his failure the night Jesus was arrested, resigned at least to be an ordinary fisherman again – possibly relieved, or even glad, not to be the one of whom so much was expected.

And then Jesus shows up. And everything is undone again.

There are too many fish to handle. The disciples manage to bring the boat in, dragging the net of fish behind them, only to discover that this stranger has started a fire and laid breakfast out for them all. And John says that none of them dare to ask who the stranger is because they knew. But one might wonder if they were speechless for another reason. Maybe "they were beginning to realize that Jesus was going to be with them forever. In the midst of their work, where they thought they might escape him, Jesus appear[s] to them."ⁱ

And after they've all sat down to breakfast, Jesus reminds Peter of that awful night. Three times that night, as Peter warmed himself beside a charcoal fire, he denied being one of the followers of Jesus. Three times this morning, as Peter warms himself beside a charcoal fire, Jesus asks him, "Do you love me?"

Some say this is about Jesus offering Peter forgiveness. And I guess I can see how it might seem like that. But I note that the word "forgive" never comes up in their conversation.

Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. And Peter says he does. And each time, when Peter says he loves Jesus, Jesus asks him to carry on the work of feeding his lambs, of caring for his sheep. Jesus commissions Peter with the task of tending the flock that Jesus will not be able to care for apart from him.

In one sense, this is nothing new. Jesus simply renews the commission that was Peter's from the very start. Except the Rock is now the Shepherd.

It's nothing new, and yet Jesus surprises Peter all the same – and the others with him. He still wants to use this remarkably typical, flawed human being to carry on the extraordinary and sacred business of love. In spite of apparent reasons to look elsewhere, Jesus is still looking at Peter.

And this isn't a private conversation between them. Jesus didn't pull Peter aside to dress him down, he publicly charges him with a sacred duty. And so it becomes our calling too.

This is what happens the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples.

We're never told when that was. So it occurs to me that any time Jesus appears unexpectedly – which is to say every time Jesus appears – is a proverbial third time.

We thought today was ordinary, but are challenged by the notion that there is no such thing, no place we can go to hide from the glory of God, no place that will separate us from the love of God showered upon us.

God's love, set loose into the world at Easter, needs us – our ordinary hands, our quotidian feet, our common hearts – to be made concrete in the our place and time. We have been invited to a meal with the risen one in our midst. We are sent forth to love and serve the world in the name of all that is sacred in us, in one another, and in our world.

¹ Sam Portaro, *Daysprings: Meditations for the Weekdays of Advent, Lent, and Easter* (Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass., 2001), p. 155.