

Easter 3C
Holy Family Church, Laurel Springs, NJ
May 1, 2022

If there were TV commercials back in the time of Jesus' Resurrection, I imagine one that would sound something like this:

Hey Peter, this Jesus dude who you have followed for three years, gave everything up for, and believed was the Messiah, has been arrested, tried, tortured, crucified, died and was buried three days ago. Now rumors are circulating that he has risen from the dead. What are you going to do next? "I'm going fishing!" Peter replies. "Who else is coming with me?" Those closest to him reply, "We will go with you." In 21st century USA, superstar athletes go to Disney World. In 1st century Palestine, the Apostles of Jesus the Christ go fishing!

Being in shock, pain, and fear, and totally lost, the disciples tried to take comfort in the familiar so they basically pick up the fishing gear where they left it by the Sea of Galilee three years earlier and look for a sense of normalcy. Little did they know that normalcy would ever be achieved again. Jesus seems to have the same idea. He would meet them again at the same place where he had originally met them and invited them to go fishing for people.

All of them had come full circle. The world is a circle without a beginning or ending. This metaphor is perfect for today's gospel; Jesus' third and final visit with his friends before the Ascension begins, where everything started, near the sea.

When Jesus began his ministry, he was walking along the Sea of Galilee where he encountered two men: "Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen." Jesus encouraged them to put down their nets and to become fishers of people. Shortly thereafter, he discovered James and John, the sons of Zebedee, working in the same sea. He called them as well to follow him. The fishermen gave up their families, communities, and their employment to join Jesus on an incredible journey. They traveled throughout the countryside and watched Jesus cure the sick and heal the lame. Jesus returned sight to the blind. All the while, he was instructing those four and others who joined them on how to invite people into a different way of life. Jesus appealed to them to inspire people to a way of love. Through his modeling, the Rabbi showed them how to care for those who were marginalized in their communities.

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. But then life goes on, and many

ordinary days follow. So it is with the third and final appearance that John records, in chapter 21. Some time has passed — John doesn't tell us 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 the danger that Jesus confronted in the city. 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, Andrew, James, and John returned to something familiar following the death and resurrection of their beloved Jesus. They knew and were comfortable with the sea. They knew how to navigate those waters, even if sometimes their nets came up empty. There is a tendency in the human experience to return to the familiar after an overwhelming event. These disciples had witnessed the terrible death of Jesus. Some of them had gone to the tomb only to discover that Jesus was no longer there. They had gone into hiding for fear someone would come looking for them and execute them as well.

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 tells them to cast the net again, to the right side

of the boat this time. The man is Jesus, and of course, they haul in a huge catch. 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.

Jesus returns to the Sea of Tiberius to reveal himself and to visit with his friends once again. The circle continues as Jesus finds the disciples in the sea, fishing and coming up with empty nets. They have come full circle. He tells them to drop the nets on the other side of the boat and the fish are plentiful. He makes breakfast for them and feeds them the same meal he fed the multitudes – fish and bread. This time, they know the Lord when they see him.

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. 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 just doesn't have enough 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. 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. This is the love Jesus demonstrated for 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. But 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*. 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.

Peter is hurt, maybe 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 the universe together 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?

Instead of recruiting them for ministry, Jesus has returned to exact promises: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Feed my lambs.” “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Tend my sheep.” “Do you love me?” he asks. “Feed my sheep.” Peter was exasperated because he knew that his love for Jesus was evident. Jesus makes clear that the mission going forward is to take care of God’s people. Love God’s people. All people are God’s people. During these fifty transforming days of Easter, may we all form a circle around those seeking God’s love and unhesitatingly offer comfort and a sense of hope for better days ahead. Amen.