

Alleluia! He is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

It's the third Sunday of Easter and we receive today John's last story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples.

By now it's clear that John is a special gospel, isn't it. Of the four gospels in the New Testament, this one stands apart. There are lots of ways it does this. John has an air to it, a certain atmosphere that's distinct from Matthew, Mark and Luke. John begins not with the birth of Jesus, or the sudden appearance of a messenger in the wilderness, but with its own story of creation. In other words it speaks of Jesus in the biggest possible frame: The Word that is God, from the beginning, made flesh.

And I think the experience we get of Jesus (when we read John) emphasizes that frame: When he first appears, Jesus knows exactly what he's here to do. But at the same time John describes this Cosmic Christ as desiring relationship - close, intimate friendship with his disciples. This is part of the power of John's account: The weight of God incarnate, God in human form (the very mystery of God become flesh), become familiar, close, and knowable in Jesus.

But I think what makes this gospel so different, and the reason it's the only gospel we read in this Seven-Sunday Season of Easter, is stated a few verses after our reading for today ends. Verse 24. Referring to the *Disciple whom Jesus loved*, it reads "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that this testimony is true." The Gospel of John is testimony - to the identity, life, death and resurrection of Christ this gospel understands and describes itself as witness.

Let that sink in.

Last week we heard the story of the risen Jesus appearing to his male disciples in a locked room. In the presence of the resurrected Christ they were re-created out of the darkness into witnesses. We heard Jesus **send** them as the Father first sent him. And we heard how their re-creation as “sent witnesses” comes from a renewed relationship with Jesus, now risen from the dead.

Our story this week, the last appearance of the risen Christ John describes, centers on Jesus' relationship with Peter. Remember with me back to the night of Jesus' arrest when Peter (having been warned by Jesus who knew what he would do) denied him. You see, Peter's denials of Jesus “before the cock crowed” - denials that Jesus foresaw - would have left Peter feeling unbearably guilty and ashamed. In Luke, the verse following Peter's final denial makes shame clear: “The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of Jesus.” The gravity, the weight, “the eye of the Lord”... So it makes sense to me that (even after being “sent” by Jesus as a witness and even having received the Holy Spirit from him in that locked room) Peter would have wanted to return to fishing.

This was his life before Jesus. It was familiar, and he was good enough at it that he'd made a living. Why not go back to it, at least long enough to figure out what it means to be a witness and what it means that Jesus had “sent” him. It seemed a good idea to some of the others too. Thomas and Nathanael of Cana in particular.

We know Thomas well enough after last week. But Nathanael: He is among the first disciples Jesus calls to be a disciple. "Come and see", Jesus invites him. But since then, we haven't seen him - he's not even been named, not until now. So why now? He reminds us of his story - the story of his being called to be a disciple. With Nathanael, John points to what our present story is about: Discipleship. For, while Thomas is feeling great after Jesus came back for him, Peter's discipleship is broken.

We see this in the desperation Peter demonstrates throwing on clothes and jumping out of the boat to swim to shore. We hear it too in another image John gives us to bounce off - that of the charcoal fire they find burning ashore. The only other charcoal fire mentioned in John is the one in the courtyard of the high priest the night Jesus is arrested. It was around that fire in the other three gospels that Peter denies knowing Jesus. But in John, around that same fire, Peter denies being a disciple of Jesus.

This is what's broken Peter's discipleship. This is the story Peter has been telling himself over and over ever since - even in the presence of the risen Christ. That is the story keeping Peter locked in that room while the other disciples rejoice in the light of that fire on the beach.

And you. What stories do you tell yourself that keep you locked in that room, shuttered and afraid? What have you done that you can't let go, even in the presence of Jesus, risen from the dead? What story keeps you from hearing the "Peace be with you" Jesus greets you with? Whatever it is, however difficult it might be to release, that story that dampens your Spirit, it keeps you immobilized. And rather than bravely stepping *sent* into the unknown, we turn back to the familiar.

So Jesus appears on the shore of wherever it is we're trying to find ourselves again. Jesus comes back for Peter, just as he comes back for you.

Around this charcoal fire, Jesus asks him a poignant question three times: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" And three times Peter tells him - "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And three times Jesus replies, "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep." What is Jesus, risen from the dead, doing with Peter?

My dad taught music, directing choirs at a Lutheran high school for almost 40 years. But they also had him teach Latin. I took grade 9 Latin with him and he would begin every class by greeting "Salve discipuli." And the students gathered would reply "Salve magister." Discipuli. Disciple. Student. Follower.

With these questions and replies, Jesus was leading, was teaching Peter back to what Peter knew - that he loved Jesus. Jesus was leading and teaching Peter **out or past** his mistakes, his failures - all that continued to hold him captive. Jesus was showing Peter what Jesus still knew - that Peter loved him. Three denials of his discipleship over a charcoal fire. Three affirmations of his love, his discipleship over the same, refining fire. Jesus was leading Peter out of the darkness of guilt and shame into the light of love and calling. A disciple healed, a servant now sent - and sent to be a witness.

Reminding him, in the warmth of relationship and forgiveness, Jesus tells him, "Follow me." To be clear, Jesus was first honest with Peter about what following him would lead to; for following Jesus would eventually lead him to a very similar death. That's a whole other sermon right there - on the reality of what following Jesus as his disciples always means. It's one we may hear before long. But Jesus' renewed invitation to this re-created disciple is clear: "Follow me."

We heard the story of another re-created disciple of Jesus in the story of Saul of Tarsus. We heard about the work he was on his way to do in Damascus under the authority of the high priest. We heard about Jesus appearing to him on the road, and his being struck blind. And we heard about the man sent to restore his sight, Ananias.

Ananias has a vision where Jesus tells him to go to Saul and lay hands on him that he might regain his sight. Ananias is skeptical and resistant to the idea, for what he knew of this Saul and what he had come to Damascus to do. But Jesus says “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.” So Ananias went as he was sent, laid his hands on Saul and said, “‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus... has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored.”

There’s a lot here. Did something like scales fall from Peter’s eyes before that fire on the beach? Was Saul struck blind to reveal the room of hatred in which he was locked? Was Ananias sent, following The Way to a place he did not want to go, that he might see the locked room that kept him confined? The end result of Ananias going is the healing of at least one disciple who not only regains his sight but is named “Brother,” who receives the Holy Spirit, and who is inducted into a community of redeemed disciples seeking to follow the way of the one who has sent them.

Jesus has work for us. He has risen from the dead, pronounced peace, he's told us we are sent, and given us the Holy Spirit. There are all kinds of things that get in our way of going on The Way - whether it's the shame of Peter, the broken hope of Thomas, the unbending hostility of Saul, or the hardened beliefs of Ananias around who deserves mercy, invitation, grace and kinship. But Jesus comes back for those whose way out of that dark room is barred by fear and shame. He comes back for you, having now returned to what you know and doing it in the way that you know. He says "Throw that net over the otherside." And the abundance of Jesus' way is revealed, the scales fall from our eyes, and we see the Lord. We cannot possibly haul in this catch. But we do the work, for though there were so many, "the nets were not torn."

This is the grace upon grace we hear of at the beginning of John's gospel. "From his fullness," it reads, "we have received, grace upon grace." This is the grace that Ananias comes to see, the grace revealed to Saul that creates him anew as Paul - the instrument chosen by God to **bring the word**. Peter finds that abundant grace, not in the catch of fish but in following Jesus' lead past all that holds him back. It's this grace upon grace to which we are witness, the word we are chosen to bear to others. And in bearing that word the abundance of Jesus' way becomes clear.

It is out of that abundance that we have received this Gospel of John. The word to which it is witness, that it bears to us, is the word Jesus sends us to bear to others. What shape will our witness take? Will we write something like a gospel? Will we speak a word of peace to those to whom we're sent? Will this new building now underway become our own locked room or will we share it as widely and generously as we can? Will we follow our way back to the familiar, or will we follow Jesus?

AMEN