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Holy Faith, Santa Fe
4 May 2025

Easter 3 – Year C
Acts 9.1-6 [7-20]
Psalm 30
Rev. 5.11-14
John 21.1-19

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you ever feel you need a bit of a pep talk around now? A bit of encouragement? You may have been good during Lent, following whatever discipline you chose – either to give something up or to take something on. You prepared yourself for our Lord’s Resurrection at Easter. You celebrated with the festal shouts of “Christ is risen! Alleluia!”, sang the glorious Easter hymns, and feasted on a wonderful meal. But now it’s two weeks on, and the shouting has died down, the meal is just a distant memory, and you wonder what’s different about your life. What difference does it make that Jesus rose from the dead?

Well, Peter and the other disciples with him also needed a pep talk in their post-Easter life. And the Risen Christ was just the one to give them their much needed encouragement. Jesus last appeared to them a week after the Day of Resurrection in Jerusalem when all the disciples were gathered together, including Thomas who could see for himself the mark of the nails in Jesus’ hands and the hole in Jesus’ side and make his confession, “My Lord and my God!”

Now a group of the disciples have gathered sometime later several days’ journey away from Jerusalem in Galilee, and you begin to wonder if these disciples are having second thoughts about following the Risen Christ. It’s an interesting group gathered together – Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee (that is, James and John), and two unnamed disciples.

The disciples identified by name all share a common trait. They have each revealed their doubts about their relationship with Jesus: Peter, by denying Jesus during his arrest three times before the cock crowed; Thomas, by his demand for physical proof that Jesus had risen from the dead; and Nathanael, by his doubt that any “good” could come out of Nazareth. At the same time, each one of these disciples has also offered an explicit confession of faith: Peter, calling Jesus the “Holy One of God” (6.69); Thomas, referring to Jesus as “My Lord and my God” (20.28); and Nathanael, saying to Jesus, “You are the Son of God, the king of Israel” (1.49).

Each of these disciples also has had his confession followed by a rhetorical question by Jesus that expressed Jesus’ own doubts about the depth of the disciples’ commitment. Jesus said to Peter, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” (6.70); to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (20.29); and to Nathanael, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” (1.50) By naming these familiar disciples who share this similar pattern of relationship with Jesus, we’re reminded for ourselves that our relationship with faith is a combination of belief and doubt, courage and cowardice.

We next hear that Peter has decided to go fishing, and the other disciples agree to go with him. Now we remember that Peter had been a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps Peter is stating his intention to return to his former way of life, before he met Jesus. Perhaps he’s suggesting that he hasn’t yet understood what it means to follow Jesus. And when the other disciples agree to go with him, perhaps they’re suggesting that they no longer want to follow Jesus. Are they representative of us, who

have had enough of our Lenten discipline, are tired of carrying the burden of our cross, and wonder what difference the Risen Christ makes in our life?

Well, after a long night of fishing the disciples have caught nothing. A figure on the beach, whom we know to be Jesus but whom the disciples don't recognize, knows that they have caught nothing. He calls to them, "Children, have you any fish?" But in this case, he doesn't use the word children to mean offspring, but in the sense of immaturity of age or development, specifically in the faith. We remember that Jesus has called his disciples to fish for people, to trawl for new followers, and not to return to their former way of life. But he tells them to cast the net to the right side of the boat, and they do so, and then they're not able to haul the net into the boat because it's so filled with fish. Instead, they have to drag the net into shore trailing the boat. We're reminded that we can do nothing by ourselves, but with Jesus' help all things are possible.

As a consequence, John recognizes the figure on the beach as Jesus. And the disciples' eyes are opened further as Jesus invites them to share a meal together on the beach. As the disciples come to know Jesus in "the breaking of the bread," so they come to know Jesus in the hauling of the fish. Having already found Jesus present in the community's gatherings, the time has come to find Jesus also present in the mission of discipleship – finding other followers and making them disciples. This is the key element of faith that the disciples, and we, still need to learn in order to grow out of being little children.

But Peter seems to have forgotten the mission of fishing for people – or otherwise – and making them disciples, and goes after the one who stands on the

shore. He jumps in the water, apparently intent on swimming to Jesus. But then we realize that the presence of the Risen Christ has put Peter back on track. Once on shore Peter hauls the net full of fish onto the land. We're told that even though there were 153 fish in the net, the net didn't tear. Why 153 fish? Some say it represents the number of species of fish known at the time, others say it represents the sum of all the numbers between 1 and 17 – go ahead, figure it out – I did – they add up to 153! All I know is that it's a lot of fish, and the net dragged to shore by others is hauled in by only one disciple. The strength that they seemed to lack together is found present in the single individual.

And then the Risen Christ gives Peter, and us, the pep talk we need. Three times Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" (perhaps for each of the times Peter denied Jesus) and each time Peter, on our behalf, answers, "Yes." And Jesus tells him, and us, alternatively, to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, and feed his sheep. Before we get exasperated like Peter with Jesus' questions, we need to understand what Jesus is asking of Peter and of us.

In the original Greek of John's Gospel, Jesus uses different words to mean love. Jesus asks Peter, do you love me in a way that you would lay down your life for me? And Peter answers in a way that means, yes Lord, you know that I am friendly toward you. Jesus asks again, do you love me in a way that you would lay down your life for me? And Peter answers again, yes Lord, you know that I am friendly toward you. Finally, Jesus reduces the question to a demand that Peter, and we, can hear, are you friendly toward me?

With that, Jesus demands Peter and us to take care of all of Jesus' followers – his lambs and his sheep. We're called to feed and shepherd, to provide nourishment of the community as Jesus has done through word and Eucharist, and to exercise the self-sacrificing guidance that marks the good shepherd. If we can't understand Jesus' question in terms of our relationship with Jesus, perhaps we can understand our relationship with our fellow followers of Jesus. So, we're left with Jesus' final demand, "Follow me."

Of course, that's where we started. Back in Lent, we heard Jesus say that anyone who wanted to follow him had to deny themselves and take up their cross. Jesus' invitation to take up the cross is not only a Lenten invitation but also an Easter invitation. It basically boils down to accepting that in this life sin, evil, and death seem to have the upper hand, but through faith we know that God has triumphed in Christ's Resurrection and has defeated the forces of darkness. The rub is how to live into that truth on a daily basis. That's why we need the pep talk.

Blessedly for us, the encouragement from the Risen Christ is that because Jesus carried his cross even unto death, so our crosses become literally bearable. Phrased slightly differently, we no longer carry our cross alone, but the Risen Christ within us sustains and encourages us when our own strength fails. As he did for Peter and the other disciples, he will also do for us. And for this we give our unfailing thanks to God.

Amen.