

“Blessed, to be a Blessing” a sermon by Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
May 7, 2017      Redwoods Presbyterian Church, Larkspur

TEXT: Psalm 23; John 21:1-19

21 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. <sup>2</sup> Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin,<sup>[a]</sup> Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

<sup>4</sup> Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” <sup>6</sup> He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. <sup>7</sup> That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. <sup>8</sup> But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards<sup>[b]</sup> off.

<sup>9</sup> When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” <sup>11</sup> So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. <sup>12</sup> Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. <sup>14</sup> This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

<sup>15</sup> When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” <sup>16</sup> A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” <sup>17</sup> He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. <sup>18</sup> Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” <sup>19</sup> (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

WE COME INTO TODAY'S GOSPEL from John precisely where the Gospel of Matthew, leaves off. In Matthew's resurrection account, 2 women find an Angel sitting at the opened tomb and then experience an appearance of Jesus himself. Both the Angel and Jesus himself give a specific and by now familiar message: Do not be afraid. Fear not. Then the Angel says, "He has risen from the grave and gone ahead to Galilee." And the risen Christ repeats that: "Tell my brothers to go to Galilee, There they will see me. "

At least some of the disciples took those instructions to heart. Today we find seven of them, Primarily the fishermen, back at the Sea of Galilee and trying to resume their lives.

How do you think they were feeling? The report says they were just hanging around, moping, until Simon Peter declares, in frustration or in restlessness, "I am going fishing." They all rouse themselves and go out, but it must not have helped their sense of doom and despair, for they catch nothing.

Church theologies call this Desolation: A feeling of complete emptiness or destruction, a separation or absence of God.

You've been there. I am sure each of you has visited this valley of the shadow of death. Each of you has known devastation and loneliness and loss and fear. And I have no doubt that each of you has felt, at some point, that God was very far away. If God existed at all, he/she/it was not there for you.

Theology admits this a difficult and dangerous place. But it can also be a place of receiving. Sometimes an experience of sadness is a moment of intimacy with God. Times of human suffering can be moments of great grace. Sometimes, when we are at our most vulnerable, God can get in and sow seeds of healing and love even more deeply. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for thou art with me.. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. My cup runneth over. "

Theology calls this Consolation, when we end up feeling particularly close to God; when, through our grief or grumpiness, we discover some comfort, an unexpected insight, an inkling of wisdom, rebirth, awareness, even joy. We feel like Jesus and are able to bear with insults gladly. We are more forgiving, more resilient. Each day becomes a discovery, or a rediscovery, as our faith grows by leaps and bounds. We work with zeal and take pleasures in meeting difficulties head-on.

And it happened here, to these seven disciples.

In the Gospel story, a man appears on the beach, waving to the dejected fishermen, maybe even jumping up and down to get their attention: "Hey guys, fish on the other side. Throw your nets over there." And lo and behold, they immediately have so many fish in their nets they can hardly get them to shore.

And then they find that same man, having made a fire and calling them to breakfast. Suddenly they recognize him, and desolation turned to consolation. Their joy was complete. Their Shepherd would once again guide them. Goodness and mercy would follow them all the days of their lives. Their world turned.

Revisit your own times of Desolation, feel the arid dryness. Now try to recall what brought you out of it? What turned you around, and what did you grasp or learn or experience? When did the world start to come back into color from black and white?

Did it begin in prayer? Sometimes when I am despairing, I look for one of the agonizing prayers from the psalms. Psalm 22, for example, begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?" I read these psalms because whatever their grief or complaint, the psalmist never doubts God, and always ends up in some sort of consolation.

Psalm 22 ends, "Future generations will be told of the glory of God; they will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn." We are that people, then unborn, who hear of God's unfailing ultimate goodness. I can vividly recall the moment I began once again to hear the birdsong, or see the intensity of a sunrise, or notice the many shades of green in our world. Your own sense of that could have been as simple as relief, or, as it once was for me, as dramatic as going to Seminary. If the desolation was complete, certainly the consolation will be as well.

This is the reality for us. We are blessed by a God who loves us and by a good shepherd who says, "do not be afraid little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

One of the prophets of our age, William Sloane Coffin, once said: "I myself believe passionately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because in my own life I have experienced Christ not as a memory, but as a presence. " I believe we all have had such experiences.

On Easter God puts life in the present tense. The appearances of the Risen Christ do not give us a promise but a presence; not a hope for the future but power for the here and now.

I can't tell you exactly what happened at that tomb site Easter morning, But I can proclaim that somehow Jesus the Christ got up with life in him again, and God's glory upon him. He got up and he said, "Don't be afraid." Rich person, poor person, ill and dying, scared, lost, skeptical, those at the end of life and those with life stretching down a wide path. Don't' be afraid.

He told the despairing disciples,, "Fish on the other side of the boat." "Cast your nets over here." I will feed you. I will care for you. I won't leave you. And so, we continue to pray, The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..

We are blessed. God's love is a blessing, and often we cannot access it without feeling it's loss. We are blessed.

But that is not the end of this particular story. Jesus feeds his flock. But then he calls upon them to go out and be a blessing to the world. Do you love me, he asks Peter? Then feed my sheep. Peter seems confused, so Jesus said again, do you love me? Then feed my lambs.

And again, "Feed my sheep." I am the shepherd, he said, and you will always be my sheep. But now I pass that mantle to you. You must be the shepherd. You must feed other sheep.

If we take him literally, if we feed those sheep, Love those lambs, we have to look at the terrible needs of the lambs and the gifts of our own abundance and try to make something better of it, something with more justice and freedom – and love.

Follow me, he says. I heard a story about a father teaching his son about how a Christian should live. He told him that Christians should forgive their enemies, help those who are in need, treat all people with justice, stay above resentment, and tell others about the love of Christ. When the lesson was over, the little boy asked, "Dad, have I ever met one of those Christians?"

Feeding the sheep means actually being one of those Christians.

And we who have heard so much tragic news that we can hardly recognize good news; we wonder how that can be.

Jesus wishes us peace in a world that rages with greed and hatred and war and genocide and cruelty. Our own country is in chaos and if you are like me, you feel increasingly helpless and fearful. From insurgencies and dangerous conflict- of- interest within our government, to the new pressure on anchor-outs in Sausalito; from the overreaching cruelties of immigration control, to the plethora of mentally ill on our streets; there seems to be no clear solutions.

And yet somehow we find it inside of us to follow Jesus and feed the sheep.

You get to decide what that looks like, whether it is giving a smile to a passerby, or sandwiches to the homeless, or letters and marches in support of ethical, inclusive government, or a thousand dollars to Canal Ministries or Planned Parenthood or International Rescue. What you don't get to decide, if you take the Resurrection seriously, is to do nothing.

Resurrection is not to convince the incredulous nor even to reassure the fearful, but to enable the believers. Maybe there is some proof after all that God raised Jesus from the dead and that the risen Christ appeared to his followers. Perhaps the proof is in the full hearts of his transformed disciples, and in a spirit-filled fellowship, in a people empowered and a church alive.

The resurrected Christ lives today, new life when you least expect, a real companion when you feel most alone, a light you can't see but you know it is there, the sun behind the clouds, God's promise kept, hope which is alive and real.

Now we are called to claim and live into that truth by feeding God's sheep as you have been fed. Christ is risen indeed! May it be so. Amen