

“Our Redeemer Revealed”

Stories of Power

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:30

Many of you know the power of stories. Just think of the stories you could tell of your own life, or of your growing up years, or of your grandparents and you’ll see how much they have influenced who you are. They are true stories that bring truth to our lives. The stories of Jesus are powerful like that; especially those that communicate the meaning and the power of the resurrection.

There are a lot of other stories about Jesus that aren’t included in the Gospel of John. But the ones that are included are here because they most effectively communicate the good news of Jesus, who is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that through faith in him you may have life.

Last week, you recall, we read about Jesus’ appearances to his disciples in that upper room behind closed doors. That’s where Jesus meets us: behind the closed doors in our lives, where fear may have a grip on us. I spoke of his mighty and enduring presence in the past, the present, and the future that cast out fear. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. At the beginning Jesus called his disciples at the shores of the sea of Galilee with a great catch of fish (Luke 5). At the closing of John’s gospel Jesus reveals himself at that seashore; again calling his disciples with a great catch of fish. Jesus reveals himself as he provides for our needs and keeps on providing to the end.

The catching of fish almost certainly symbolizes the catching of people. The 153 fish signify the all-embracing character of the mission of the followers of Jesus. The unbroken net means that in spite of the inclusion of such a vast diversity of people, the community represented by these disciples will hold together. The Risen Lord continues to be revealed among us in our time; in that community of "caught people" who join him in his meal.

Embracing Resurrection

Now it’s no small thing to embrace this story of Jesus’ appearance after rising from death. Many folks couldn’t accept that God might act in this way, to raise Jesus from the dead. We know that even Jesus’ own closest followers had trouble accepting it, until he came to them personally.

Many reject that Jesus literally rose from the dead – they would rather speak in metaphorical or philosophical terms about resurrection. Last week we read how Thomas – the one who doubted – received the proof he asked for: he saw and touched the wounds in Jesus’ hands and side. The risen Jesus was the very same Jesus they had walked with.

To affirm the resurrection of Jesus is to affirm that natural laws can be broken. If the system of nature can develop a crack and let God’s light shine through, then the systems of human order and existence can also develop a crack, and let the light of hope shine through. To embrace the resurrection is to embrace the greatest sign of hope we have.

To believe in Jesus’ resurrection is to believe that God really does act in peoples’ lives. If Jesus was raised from the dead then we have a chance also; not only for the reality of life beyond this life, but also for eternal living today in lives of goodness, pleasing to God. We don’t have to be weighed down by sin because Jesus broke the power of sin, whose consequence is death, and through him we can rise to a new life with God our creator.

People get pretty passionate about their beliefs don’t they? Many times that’s a good thing, to be passionate about our beliefs, for that’s what inspires others and gets things done. We just have to be careful, for human passion is a powerful thing and if not placed under the lordship of Christ, we can get off track and do some stupid or downright bad things. That’s what happened to Saul who was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” He was a true believer of God, but just couldn’t see that God was

doing a new thing in Jesus. Like many devout Jews of his day, Saul was looking for a messiah, but Jesus didn't fit his image of the messiah. His followers were a threat to the system of truth and order as Saul knew it, so in the name of a loving God he was breathing threats and murder. Now doesn't that sound familiar? From zealous religious leaders who declare war on nonbelievers to church members who hold grudges against other members over some slight or disagreement, sometimes our passion for a cause or a piece of the truth gets hold of us in troubling ways. But we know, God knows, that true passion is a fire lit by the Holy Spirit, not our emotions, and the H.S. comes to those who wait in prayer.

Thanks be to God, Saul responded to this meeting with the risen Jesus who asked him, "Why do you persecute me?" He repented and embraced resurrection. Saul became a new man through Jesus – he was Paul the great evangelist who shared new life found in Christ. How about you – are you a new person who has embraced resurrection? The sinner who has repented and been forgiven is the one who really sings the hymns of God!

Life-Changing Resurrection

The story in John's Gospel doesn't end with the resurrection of Jesus. Saul who became the new man Paul was one of many, starting with Peter who have been resurrected. Peter like the other disciples had experienced the hope and joy brought by Jesus' resurrection. With the resurrection came the absolute conviction that God was real, alive; that good triumphed over evil; that life triumphed over death. Still, there was Peter's personal resurrection yet to be effected.

The risen Lord asks Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (meaning the other disciples). The first time Jesus asks the question, I suspect Peter responded with great enthusiasm: "Lord, you know that I love you!" And Jesus says, "Feed my sheep." That is, nurture my disciples. However when Jesus asked the same question a second time, I suspect Peter responded with some confusion: "Lord, you know that I love you." Yet, when Jesus asked the same question a third time, Peter realized what was going on. He is forced back into a past he sought to bury. He is thrown back to that time before the resurrection when he denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times, and then he heard the cock crow and he wept bitterly.

He responds to that third question so simply, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Peter opened himself up; his very being, including his past. In a sense Peter repented of his past sin.

There is a tremendous power in the resurrection of Jesus. Yet we, like Peter, are invited to not only embrace that resurrection--we are also offered a personal resurrection; a resurrection that frees us from the weight of our past. Psalm 25:7 "Remember not the sins of my youth . . ." In a sense Jesus is saying here, "My resurrection is not the only resurrection. There is a second resurrection - your personal resurrection. You must let go of your past and come to me if you are to be whole."

Yet there is still more going on in this short dialogue. Jesus asked Peter the first time, "Simon do you **αγαπας** me more than these?" Peter responded, "Yes, Lord. I **φιλω** you." The N. T. was written in Greek, which had several words for "love." Jesus asked Peter if he loved with "agape" love; that self-sacrificing, divine-like love that Jesus exemplified. Peter responded that he loved Jesus like a brother, as a man loves his comrades or companions. A second time Jesus asked do you **αγαπας** me, and Peter responded the same way. The third time Jesus came down to Peter's level and asked, "Simon, do you **φιλεις** me?" – do you love me like a brother, no longer asking if he can love as fully as Jesus loves. Peter was disheartened; probably because he realized that Jesus knew him so well that he asked him to love as best he can – even knowing that his brotherly love had failed before when Jesus was arrested. If he cannot reach to the level of divine love then Jesus asked Simon to do as well as any man or woman could do. Peter wants to be able to love him with a divine love, but he says, "Yes, Lord, I'll love you as best I can."

Don't we know what it is to yearn for the ability to love as Jesus loves? Didn't he say, "Love one another as I have loved you?" Even when we earnestly desire to imitate him we so often fall short. Think of your love for you spouse, your children, you grandchildren, let alone others in this congregation, or anyone else. We can do a pretty good job of loving one another when things are going smoothly – but what happens when we are under stress? It is so very hard to sacrifice our own preferences for the needs of others. Is it as hard to put aside our preferences to love Jesus? What is the top priority around here? He still asks, "Do you love me?"

After each of Peter's responses Jesus directed him to "feed my sheep" – that is, nurture the other disciples. He was forgiving Peter. Through that grace, not a cheap grace, but a grace that demands honesty before God, Jesus tells Peter that his human love will be enough, because Jesus' grace is sufficient. Go and help others find resurrection and there will come a time you will once again be tempted to deny me, but you will be faithful even to the end – because I will be with you.

You personal resurrection is just as real. God is God of the past, the present and the future. All that Christ wrought for you and me on the Cross is wrought *in* you and me. The free committal of ourselves to God gives the Holy Spirit the chance to impart to us the holiness of Jesus Christ.¹ Keep loving as best you can, cling to Jesus, and your love be enough and get better.

Through the risen Jesus your past can be healed – as was Peter's, then Paul's – and countless others. He is here, today, providing us sustenance and strength. He sends us into the future to catch more disciples. And each time he says to us "feed my sheep."

¹Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, "March 21," Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, 1984.