

Once Upon a Time...

3 Easter, year C - John 21:1-19

preached by the Rector at St.Paul's, Henderson April 14, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!]

Once upon a time... there was a king born in Bethlehem. He went about the land healing the sick and the lame, giving sight to the blind, comforting those that needed to know that they were not alone in the world, and telling *everyone* the good news that his kingdom of love and mercy and grace had finally come to the whole world. In the end, those that didn't want to hear about such a kingdom thought they got the upper hand and had the king killed. But on the third day, the king rose from the grave... and they all lived happily ever after.

You know what? I just don't trust stories with *that* kind of ending.

By now, most of you know that Easter is my absolute *favorite* part of the Church year. I love the flowers and the music... *and* the crowds. And I dearly, dearly love to say "Alleluia!" again. But a lot of times, we let the Easter message become a kind of syrupy-sweet message that threatens to turn the whole Gospel story into some kind of fairy tale.

Fairy tales make for nice bedtime reading, but their endings are seldom trustworthy to describe our day-to-day reality. Don't you ever wonder how many years Hansel and Gretel had to spend in therapy trying to cope with having almost become the witch's main course? Don't you ever wonder just how many porridge bowls you can fill with one plump little Goldilocks? And what happened when those three little pigs grew up to become three great big boar hogs sharing that one small brick house? I wouldn't want to smell that place. Not by the hair on my chinny-chin!

Nope, fairy tale endings just aren't the *truth*. And regardless of the distorted picture we may want to paint for ourselves of a rose-hued, perfectly peaceful Easter morn, the story of the resurrection in the Gospels just isn't, "and they lived happily ever after," but a potent mixture, a heady brew, of hope *and* struggle.

The ending of Mark tells of a young man at the empty tomb telling three terrified women that Jesus will meet them all back in Galilee. Matthew goes a step farther in having Jesus appear to the disciples, though the one and only thing the resurrected Jesus tells the disciples is to get back to work: "Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach." The ending to Luke's resurrection story is the whole of the book of Acts. By the time *that* story's over, Stephen has been stoned, James has been beheaded, Paul is waiting for his trial in Rome and the followers of Jesus have spread the Good News throughout the known world.

And then there's this morning's passage from John's Gospel. It's an epilogue of sorts, a clear refusal to allow the story to come to a "Happily-Ever-After" ending. Peter and the disciples don't head down to the local watering hole to toast the victory of the resurrection. They don't organize a fund-raising campaign. They don't throw a ticker-tape parade. In fact, instead of joy, there seems to be only relief that the whole thing... is over.

Having seen the risen Lord, having once again heard his voice, having seen the nailprints in his hands and the scar of the spear in his side, Peter stands up one day and says, "I'm going fishing." He's taken a few years out of his life and followed Jesus. He's heard him speak wonderful words. He's watched him perform incredible signs. But he's also traveled from town to town without *any* rest. Over and over, he was caught in the middle between Jesus and the religious authorities. Time and time again, he had misunderstood what Jesus was all about, up to and including denying he even *knew* him – *three times*. And in the end, he saw his master, his teacher, his friend betrayed and beaten and executed.

Eventually, in his old age Peter might have come around to nostalgia for the good old days, when he and his friends had followed Jesus. But here in the shadow of the resurrection, he seemed ready to get back to the one thing he knew so well: good old, hard but simple, and *predictable*... fishing. Peter thought the fight was over, and he was ready to lay down his sword and pick up his nets, he was ready to return to his simple, *normal* life.

But the epilogue to John's Easter story is not a "happily ever after" ending. Once again, the resurrected Jesus interrupts Peter's easy normalcy, and once again teaches Peter and the boys what fishing is *really* all about. This is a story about the real life process of starting over. This is a story that reflects the reality that we as Christians know and live, that we *as humans* know and live. This is a story that gives up the happily ever after fantasy, and tells the *truth* that life is *filled* with a mixture of success and failure, made *up* of hopes *and* struggles.

I wish I could stand in this pulpit and tell you that for Christians, everything is always goodness and light. I wish I could stand here and say that every problem, every care, every toil is taken away. I wish I could stand here and say that the Easter story puts a cherry on top of life's bowl-full, and that we will all live happily ever after.

But a year or so ago when you called me to this desk, I made a commitment to tell you the *truth*. And the plain, direct, unvarnished truth the good news of the Gospels, is that Easter is not an ending at *all*, but a whole 'nother *beginning*. An Easter story that starts with nothing being in the tomb but an echo, and closes with a wake in a locked room that gets transformed into a blessed reunion, is *great*. But it tells only *half* the truth. The *whole* truth, the real *Good News*, is that the story of the resurrection continues, right back out there at the lake. The real *Good News* is that the story continues back in the world struggling with hope to continue with the work of Christ. The real *Good News* is that *we*... have a job to do.

In the glow of a different dawn, Jesus sits on the beach with Peter, not to console him, not to comfort him, not to tell him that the story is finally over. "Do you love me, Peter?" he asks. "Feed my sheep." "Do you love me?... Feed my sheep." "Do you love me?... Feed my sheep." Jesus asks Peter what is *really* important to him. He doesn't ask him about his global strategy. He doesn't ask him about his fiscal priorities. He doesn't ask him to define his "meta-goal." He asks him point blank, no holds barred, "Do you love me?" Then he tells him, and he tells him, and he tells him... to *do* something about it.

You see, dear friends, as Christians, we really have only *one* priority, one center of all that we say and all that we do and all that we *are*, and that is the answer to that one question. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks. And if the answer to that one defining question is the same as Peter's, "Lord you know that I love you," then we are called to do something about it. We are called to feed his sheep. Not just the ones that are in our same social circle. Not just the ones that feed us. Not just the ones that say nice things about us. We are called to feed all his sheep. Then the Gospel ends as it began, as it *always* begins, with Jesus saying to his disciple, "Follow me," as if he were calling us to discipleship for the very first time.

Once upon a time, there was a king was born in Bethlehem... Once upon a time, there was a lamb that was slain... Once upon a time, the one who had died, *rose* from his grave and the Lord of Life shattered death and invited each of us to join him in eternal life... Whataya say we go fishing. Whataya say we find some sheep to feed. Whataya say we get busy writing the rest of Christ's Good News.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!]