

## The Rule of Threes

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

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson April 10, 2016*

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!]

As most of you know by now, it has been a... *complicated* couple of weeks here in Lake Wobegone. Jenny and I left here after our beautiful and wonderful Easter morning celebration in time to join my mother in South Bend before the end of Easter day. Our visit was intended to be just a brief check-in, but it ended up with her setting up an appointment for this past Monday to have hip replacement surgery. Heading on through to Clarksville that Tuesday, Jenny and I made plans for her to stay there through last weekend to attend to her father, whose condition had begun to deteriorate, while I brought her car up to Henderson in case complications with my mother required me to return to northern Indiana, a trip probably ill-advised for my ugly green truck. As it happens, the wisdom of that plan was underscored when my return to Henderson Saturday afternoon was delayed by John having to be moved to a care facility as his situation made his home care impossible.

As of this time last Sunday, some of you might remember, that was *still* the plan. But several of you suggested that I should just go on and go to be with my mother, rather than waiting to be *called* there, and a handful of folks even did a handful of things that helped make it easier to disengage here, including my brother, Larry, who, by the way, got word this week that he successfully passed his canonical examinations. Then came the word that Jennifer Preston's mother, Virginia, who almost everybody knew better as Sophia's Gig, because... well, *Sophia*, Gigi's ongoing fight at IU Medical Center in Indianapolis had taken a turn for the worse, and I decided that if I went ahead to South Bend, I could look in on Gigi and the family on my way. After getting up early Monday morning, and clearing up a couple of things here at the church, I headed north, not in time to see my mother before her procedure was scheduled to begin, but, I hoped, in time to be there when she came out of surgery. As it happens, the wisdom of that plan was underscored when, after I had surprised my Mom by saying hello to her in the recovery room, her surgeon came and told us that there were *indeed* complications that required them to take her back to surgery. It was shortly after that *second* surgery began, that I got a call from Jenny that her Daddy had passed.

An hour or so later, Mom was out of surgery and out of danger, and by noon the next day, my sister Becky, who, though I give her a hard time from this desk from time to time for the antics of our shared childhood, is a phenomenal nurse, at the same hospital where Mom was being treated, Becky had taken charge of monitoring Mom's recovery, and told me to go home to be with Jenny. After another stop in Indy to check on Gigi, and six-and-a-half hours of driving, I stopped in Henderson only long enough to pick up a handful of extra undies from home and a folder I needed from my desk, and to drop by Rookies to check in with an expanded group of Saints, Sinners and Cynics. It was there that I learned from Quinton that Coy Owen's father had also passed. When I was again on the road, and again on the phone with Jenny, I relayed this additional information, to which her response was, "Oh my, these things always come in threes!" By the next evening, we found out that Gigi lost what I cannot help but call her courageous struggle, and we knew that, at least in *this* case, our Parish had *indeed* experienced three deaths in our extended family.

Now I was very pleased with the group of us that made it to David Onan's funeral at Holy Name on Friday, a contingent that was even recognized by Fr. McBride who warned us to stay together, lest we spread out and "infect" his flock with Episcopalian ideas. And I was proud of how the Parish came together to welcome Gigi's family and friends here a couple of hours later, recognizing that though she

was not officially on our rolls, Gigi was nevertheless a part of our family. And I was humbled beyond words at the many of you who sent cards, and sent food, and came all the way to Clarksville to visit with Jenny's family Friday evening or to be part of John's service yesterday, leading my mother-in-law, Pauline to comment, "Those folks in Kentucky sure do love you and Jenny!" Thank you!

But, Jenny and I have had conversation about this three-deaths-in-a-row thing many times over the years, especially since a particular stretch about six months after we got to St. Mark's Pro-Cathedral in Hastings, Nebraska, during which three parishioner died on three subsequent Saturdays. And every time we have had this conversation, I assure her that statistically, deaths do *not* organize themselves into groups of threes, it's just that we tend to *recognize* them in groups of three. In fact, I say *all* of this not only by way of explaining why this morning's ramblings from up here are probably more rambling than usual, but also to illustrate what in the field of classic rhetoric is called the "Rule of Threes," the tendency in human cognition, and especially in human communication since the development of rhetoric by the ancient Greeks, to recognize, and even *present* things in patterns of threes. Perhaps you've noticed that good speech givers, or maybe the people that *write* those speeches, tend to include such patterns of threes. I am also fond of such patterns, which, if you haven't noticed before, you probably will *now*.

You see, this morning's Gospel lesson, at least the part that's not about a miraculous catch of fish, perhaps we'll get to that part when it rolls back around in three years, our Gospel for the *Third* week of Easter is all *about* the "Rule of Threes." Being a fairly decent Greek writer, the author of the Fourth Gospel knew all about the Rule, and uses it all through his story of the Good News of Jesus Christ, from, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," to, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," to three times in the Garden of his betrayal declaring without equivocation, "I am he." And in this, his final chapter of the Good News, in this, the text says right there, "the *third* time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead," in this the *last* time Jesus will speak to those who are to witness to the Good News of the Word made flesh to dwell among us, John uses the "Rule of Threes" to make what is perhaps the most profound point of the Gospel.

That point really starts back before the Resurrection, for us, four weeks ago with the Passion Gospel. Each of the four gospel writers tells the story of Christ's Passion a little differently, but they all tell the story of how Peter denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but *three* times. In *his* telling of the story, John even stretches it out a bit, letting the action move forward as Peter, part of the inner circle of three, the leader of the disciples, the one who had even taken up the sword until the Master told him to lay it down again, Peter echos Jesus's three-times "I am he," with his own three-times, "I am *not*." And the cock crowed, and that was the end for Peter. When Mary saw the stone rolled away, Peter was the first to put his head in the empty tomb, but when she shared her first sight of the Risen Christ, "I have seen the Lord!", Peter's response was to go hide behind a locked door. It was there that the Lord found Peter and the others, and breathed his peace upon them. But perhaps with the cock's crow still ringing in his ears, Peter returns to the life he had lived before the Master called him to follow, "I'm going fishing." And most of the disciples went with him.

And that is where Jesus finds him, there where he found him in the first place, before the preaching and parables and palms, before the Passion and the pain and the "I am not"s. When the miraculous catch was done, when all those fish have been hauled ashore, when bread was taken and broken and eaten, Jesus says to Simon Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter replies, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And *Jesus* answers, "Feed my lambs."

A second time, Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And Jesus says, "Tend my sheep."

And, knowing that we know it's coming, John tells us that Jesus asks a *third* time, "Do you love me?" Peter knew it was coming, too, and, perhaps with the cock's crow *still* ringing in his ears, he answers, "Lord, you know that I love you." And Jesus completes the circle of forgiveness, completes the circle of resurrection, completes the circle of calling, to follow *and* to lead, "Feed my sheep."

And so, dear friends, here at the end of the story, John's use of the "Rule of Threes" does *exactly* what it is supposed to do, it calls us to pay attention to what is *really* important: not death that comes in threes, not doubt, not denial, not even death itself, but love, but love, but love. Love that began the story before time even existed. Love that finished the story at the cross and the empty tomb. Love that calls us, and calls us, and calls us to do something about it. And so, Jesus calls us again, and and again, and again to follow him in love, as if the story was just beginning again... in you, and in me.

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