

“The Last Breakfast”
3rd Sunday of Easter – May 5, 2019 – John 20:1-19/C

Years ago, Pastor Leith Anderson shared an experience from his youth (as told by Dean Register in *The Minister's Manual*, 1995.) When he was a little boy, Anderson grew up outside of New York City and was an avid fan of the old Brooklyn Dodgers. One day his father took him to a World Series game between the Dodgers and the Yankees. He was so excited, and he just knew the Dodgers would trounce the Yankees. Unfortunately, the Dodgers never got on base, and his excitement was shattered. Years later, he was talking with a man who was a walking sports almanac. Leith told him about the first major league game he attended and added, "It was such a disappointment. I was a huge Dodger fan, and the Dodgers never got on base."

The man said, "You were there? You were at the game when Don Larsen pitched the first perfect game in all of World Series history?" Leith replied, "Yeah, but uh, we lost." He then realized that he had been so caught up in his team's defeat that he missed out on the fact that he was a witness to a far greater page of history.

Our readings today present two giants of the 1st century Jesus movement who we know very well: Peter and Paul. In the 1st reading, Saul, soon-to-be the Apostle Paul, had one of those life-changing experiences on the Road to Damascus – and almost missed it because he was bent on persecuting those lawless Christians! In John's Gospel, Peter had been so caught up in the pain of his arrogant refusal to let Jesus wash his feet, his denial of Jesus, the inconceivable emptiness of Jesus' tomb, that he ran home from Golgotha and almost missed Easter altogether.

But God followed Paul along that road to Damascus to claim him; God went all the way from Jerusalem in the south to the Sea of Galilee up north, to reclaim Peter. God is like that - always seeking, always finding, regularly reclaiming **us**. Today, we read parts of Paul's and Peter's "resurrection" stories - their reclamations by God from life to death to new life.

The last time we saw Peter, he was well on his way along the path of his dying. Somehow, he had lost sight of who he was, so in the Garden he found himself separating an ear from the head of Malchus, the High Priest's slave. Soon he would be denying that he was a follower of Jesus, and he would do it **three times**. It was more and more clear that he would not be keeping his promise to never leave Jesus. He was not even present at foot of the cross when Jesus died.

Who knows how far Peter fell into himself? Could he recover from his guilt in disappointing himself, in disappointing Jesus? On Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene came to tell him that Jesus was gone. So Peter ran to see what she was talking about. What he saw: a stone rolled back, an empty grave, discarded burial linens. If he had stayed just a few more moments he'd have seen Jesus, alive. But he ran. I imagine Peter didn't know what to do, any more than the other disciples, since Jesus died and then disappeared. Was Jesus gone forever? If he'd been raised on the third day as he had told them repeatedly, had he returned to the Father directly from the tomb?

John's gospel doesn't say if Peter stayed around or returned home to Galilee, but apparently he was not hanging on the edges of the group when Mary told the disciples, "*I have seen the Lord!*" Nor if he was present when Jesus came through locked doors, breathed out his Spirit on those gathered, and lifted Thomas beyond his doubt.

Then, suddenly, we're not in Jerusalem any more, but at the Sea of Galilee. And there is Peter, the Big Fisherman, trying to put some pieces together; back-peddaling from the precipice his life had seemed to be headed toward. Only 7 of the 11 were there in Galilee that day, but Thomas was definitely one of them. So Peter **had** heard, yet might not have quite grasped the big news. As hard as we all try, we can't escape the **Death** before **New Life** - we can't go back to old days, the old

ways, because Resurrection changes everything! Peter was trying his best to get back to himself. "I'm going fishing," he announced gamely, and the disciples agreed to go along (perhaps casting those sideways looks at one another as if to say, "however will we convince him?") But without Jesus, even fishing wasn't working out for Peter. That is, until Jesus shows up on the shore, and calls to them...then...a miraculous catch of fish! A miraculous day in Peter's new life! But Peter was dangerously close to getting stuck inside his loss, focused only on his own failings and disappointments, and almost missed his own experience of Easter.

But it was there in the risen Christ. At breakfast, we can imagine these friends reunited - laughing and sharing and questioning and enjoying each other's company - but after a full night of fishing, they probably each dropped off, one by one, for a well-deserved nap. Then, Jesus beckons Peter to join him by a charcoal fire. Three times he checks Peter's heart; three times he gives him new life. It would be too easy to think this was triple forgiveness for Peter's triple denial - but there is no shame or blame or punishment around this fire. It's more about Peter believing he could be who Jesus knew him to be. "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" It was all about Peter remembering his own identity, and what it felt like to say, "You are the Christ! The Son of the Living God!" and believing it for himself.

Jesus calls Peter to The Last Breakfast (maybe it was a "do-over.") But this breakfast was for the purpose of reclaiming Peter the Rock and having him feel the trust that Jesus had in him so that he might become Peter the Shepherd. "Feed my sheep." Jesus trusts Peter with the world he so loves. Now Peter must believe in that love. Believe in Jesus' trust in him, so that he can believe in himself, once again.

Why is it so much easier to believe *in* Jesus, than it is to believe that Jesus *believes in us*? From before we were born, we were beloved, chosen, called by God. And we, too, have been called, because God knows that we are exactly the right ones to be the shepherds. "Feed my sheep." One at a time. One handful of grass. One sip of water. "Feed my lambs." One comforting embrace. One word of hope - or forgiveness - like ointment on a burn or a cool compress on a weary brow. "Feed my sheep." One *prayer* at a time. One *day* at a time. One *life* at a time. It is work we can all do, and it is to this work that Jesus calls us, as his Spirit whispers deep inside: "I have called you by name - you are mine." Amen.

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Resources: Leith Anderson story as told by Dean Register in *The Minister's Manual*, 1995; Don Larsen article from *Wikipedia*; Karoline Lewis and Joy J. Moore for *Working Preacher*