

## JESUS ON THE BEACH

*Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 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.*

*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 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. 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. 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 off.*

*When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have caught." 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. 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. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

*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." 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." 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. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and 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." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."*

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May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts and minds, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

***Please be seated.***

I am offering this talk *in memoriam* Fr. Ted Coolidge, who has been crucially important to the renaissance of my spiritual life through the sanctuary offered by this parish.

I would like for us to begin together by breathing three mindful and contemplative breaths, IN and OUT.

IN the name of the Father, OUT &  
IN the name of the Son, OUT &  
IN the name of the Holy Spirit. OUT  
Amen.

My name is Bill Ball, like a dollar bill and a baseball.

This is the first time that I have spoken from this pulpit – or any other pulpit for that matter. Because I have only been active in the parish for a little more than a year, I would like to share a few personal details about myself, things that most of you probably don't know about me yet. That is, I will tell you *three secrets*.

**First secret:** I am NOT a “cradle Episcopalian.”

I was baptized as an infant in a Methodist church and confirmed as a pre-teen in another Methodist church. When my father stopped attending church, I used that as an excuse to stop going too. This was in the 1960s in Georgia, and there was a lot going on, especially in the Deep South. When my father got caught up in an adulterous affair with the next-door neighbor's wife, a chaos of trauma ensued. God was not in my life, or at least not in *my notion* of my life.

I did not consider myself a Christian during my teenage and college years, or rather, not until our senior year of college when my wife and I were preparing to move to Pittsburgh for graduate studies. In college, she came to a Christian commitment through American nature writing and John Milton. I met Jesus on the beach, when the sun's light reflecting in the Atlantic ocean water stunned me, blinded me, with a sensation that the light was pointing directly at me, even while I was aware that the same effect – of being pointed at directly, blindingly – was also true from the perspective of every other person on the beach. But my commitment to Christ was grounded mentally and morally, at first, in a strong sense that, *like my father*, I would be unlikely to remain faithful to my marriage vows without living in the context of a community of Christian believers.

In Pittsburgh we found Christian communities, we explored communal living with another Christian, we were nurtured as young parents in a biracial Episcopal church on the Northside,

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we cared for my wife's aging grandmother in our home, we started a family. In church, I was active in some of the same ways that I am active here, and in other ways too. I was confirmed as an Episcopalian in 1984. My wife's interest in the faith waned, and for some years, at the urging of a deacon, I set my heart to "loving her into the kingdom." There were other struggles. Perhaps there always are.

Our move from Pittsburgh to Atlanta in 1995 was very good for family life, and a good step in my professional life. It allowed my wife to rebuild her confidence as a teacher. But it was - perhaps predictably - a disaster for my spiritual life, and in the end, a catastrophe for our marriage, which ended 13 days short of our 40th anniversary in July 2016. *Mea culpa*.

**Now for my second secret:** No, just kidding, I am only going to tell you that one secret.

**Third secret:** I went into so much detail about my first secret because I had an extreme emotional response to the gospel lesson for today, and I think that the strength of my response was due to that personal history.

My emotional response included *weeping*, so I want to start there.

Weeping has been on my mind for the past few weeks, especially while I have been processing the Traces of the Trade film viewing, panel discussion, and community debriefing session that this parish co-sponsored with other churches and societies in April. One concept that emerged during the debriefing session was the notion of the restorative power of weeping (by the living) for the pain suffered by and caused by our ancestors. Today's psalm aligns with this thought:

Weeping may spend the night,  
But joy comes in the morning. (30:6)

And perhaps more pertinent in the context of worldwide Holocaust Remembrance Day,

What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the Pit?  
Will the dust praise you or declare your faithfulness? (30:10)

I fancy that verses like these (and there are many similar sentiments expressed throughout the Psalms) may have informed Jesus's own awareness of his resurrection mission. And of course, as we heard a few weeks ago in the run-up to Easter, Jesus himself wept at the tomb of Lazarus, being "greatly disturbed and deeply moved," just before raising Lazarus from the dead – a foreshadowing of Jesus's own resurrection on That Day, the First Easter. This weeping by Jesus expresses to me most poignantly his fundamental humanity as experienced and expressed in his psycho-physical, pre-resurrection body.

What about the pneumatic, post-resurrection body? Well, we heard last week about the first two times that Jesus showed himself to the disciples, a story that turned on the doubts of the apostle

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Thomas (“named the Twin”), who refused to believe “unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side.” Jesus showed him.

And in Luke’s gospel, when the eleven (apostles) are shown his hands and feet and invited to “handle me and see [his] flesh and bones,” when they still “disbelieved for joy, and wondered,” Jesus asks for a piece of broiled fish “and he took and ate it before them.” This indicates a fully functional digestive system. To be sure, the pneumatic body has some additional features, such as appearing or showing up when two or more believers are gathered. But perhaps let’s think about that further on another occasion.

Today’s lesson from John’s gospel tells of the third time that Jesus showed himself to the disciples. This time his purposes are deeper than establishing credible witnesses.

**Now I am going to ask you to become more engaged in this story**, so let’s treat it like a drama, a passion play if you will. Take another deep breath or two and get ready for action.

The cast of characters includes Jesus and seven disciples. Thomas (named the Twin) puts in a cameo appearance, as in this scene he takes a back seat to Simon Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” These latter two chaps were last mentioned by name in the foot race to the empty tomb in chapter 20 verses 4-9, after which “the disciples went back to their homes.” In fact, from the text of chapters 20 and 21, it is not clear to me whether Peter or any of the other disciples here with Thomas have encountered the risen Lord yet. Let us suppose not.

The setting has changed, to Galilee by the Sea of Tiberias. Now let’s use our imagination.

Please close your eyes and put yourself in the role of one of the disciples, perhaps one of the “two others” mentioned, or perhaps even “the one whom Jesus loved.” You and the fellows are at the shore in the evening or at night. The spring air is crisp and clear.

What is the quality of the light? Is it the luminous glow of the “perfect hour,” or has night already fallen fully? Is the water illuminated by the moon, or simply by the vast and magnificent sea of stars above?

Can you hear the water lapping against the shore? Are birds flying and calling?

Does the water of the sea have any particular smell?

Peter says, “Let’s go fishing.”

Okay, sure, why not? Your feet get wet clambering into the boats, but you are used to fishing. That was your profession before Jesus called you to the ministry, wasn’t it?

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**Remember your calling.** Were you fishing the day that Jesus called you? Did you leave your family and your nets? How does it feel to be returning to fishing for fish, after being called to be a fisher of men? Does it increase your regret? Or help you to forget?

***Take a moment to sit with that.***

But there are troubles - no fish. All night, no fish.

How does THAT make you feel? Are you frustrated, maybe a bit cranky or contentious? Imagine feeling how you feel when family life or a friendship is difficult.

***Take a moment to sit with that.***

Now someone on the shore tells you to cast your nets on the right side of the boat, and suddenly the nets are too heavy to handle. Imagine that it is YOU that first understands that it is Jesus on the beach.

**When you perceive that it is Jesus, what FEELINGS do you have?** How are those feelings expressed in your psycho-physical body?

***Take a moment to sit with that.***

I don't know how you feel, but:

I

**FEEL**

**SHATTERED.**

Shocked, and completely undone.

And I weep. I burst into tears.

It causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

With relief, and wonder, and amazement.

And with fear and trembling, because now anything is possible, anything can happen.

Now get moving. Drag the nets and stagger to the shore. Imagine yourself as one of the group, enjoying a simple meal of fish and bread over an open fire in the early dawn by the sea with the risen Lord Jesus.

**What do you say to Jesus, when you're with him in that place at that time?**

***Take a moment to sit with that.***

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What I have to say is: **“I am so sorry. Sorry that I betrayed you, sorry that I lied to you, sorry that I broke my solemn vows to you, sorry that I hurt you. Please forgive me.”**

And now take a moment to recover from that experience, whatever it was for you.

And now you notice that Jesus and Peter have finished breakfast and are engaged in conversation, and Jesus asks him (three times) “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” And Peter replies (three times), “Yes, Lord, I love you.” And you hear Jesus say “Follow me.”

And as they turn to depart, Jesus leading and Peter following, you get up to follow too. And Peter looks at you and says, “What about that guy?”

So there is this one last question to ask -

**What about you?**

**Will you follow Jesus in the Way of the Cross?**

**What does that mean in your life?**

**Take a moment to sit with that. Take the rest of your life to work it out.**

**Pray with me, brothers and sisters.**

Lord Jesus Christ, dear Risen Lord.

You meet us where we are, in all our grubby, distracted, human, all-too-human frailties.

And you ask, “Do you love me?”

By your grace and the presence of your Holy Spirit, we beg you, please, let our answer be “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

And, Lord Jesus, when you command, “Follow me,” by your grace and the presence of your spirit may our actions always be to rise, take up our cross, and follow you in the way of sacrificial love, as The Way to the Father and eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

AMEN. ALLELUIA.