

EASTER HITS PETER AND PAUL
A Sermon for The Third Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2010
Text: John 21:1-19

"Simon son of John, do you love me?"

I was always Jesus' biggest admirer. . . . Student. . . . Adviser.

When Jesus asked all of us who we thought he was, I was the one who went way out on the limb and said "You are the Christ. The Messiah. The One who is to come."

I meant it, too. And I threw myself into being the best disciple I could possibly be. James and John and I, we got really close to him. Went everywhere he went. He created memories for us on the Mount of Transfiguration. And in the Garden of Gethsemane. We supported him everywhere he went.

Sometimes, we had to keep him from being his own worst enemy. I really thought it was a big mistake, for example, even going to Jerusalem when he knew they were going to kill him. It seemed to me that nothing good could possibly come of that. We were building huge momentum in Galilee. People were lining up with Jesus, getting into the act, telling others about him, seeking his advice about all kinds of things.

We were getting big crowds, and Jesus was managing them well. He was facing really difficult situations, but he always came out smelling like a rose. Even when someone was already dead, and we thought it might be a mistake for Jesus to show up, he amazed us. Time after time.

It was marvelous, being Jesus' disciple. And I wanted so hard to preserve that. To protect him, so that I could always be his. I wanted to keep him with us forever. I wanted everyone to learn to love him the way I did.

So a couple times I disagreed with Jesus, because he seemed to be jeopardizing the whole thing. When he did the embarrassing thing with washing our feet, I could just see how he was lowering himself in everybody's eyes, so I tried to prevent it at first. I thought everyone needed to keep Jesus first, so I refused to let him wash my feet. He said, "If you don't let me do this, then you can't be mine"—so of course I gave in. I even said he should wash my head and my hands!

And in the Garden of Gethsemane later that evening, Jesus seemed to be giving away the whole Kingdom of God thing by allowing the officers to arrest him. I never liked Judas Iscariot in the first place, and now Judas was going to get his way and be the big hero and Jesus would be finished, and what would that get us all? I pulled my sword on them, hoping to rescue the situation—but of course Jesus wouldn't have any of that. He actually healed the guy I hurt with my sword!

Then, I thought our last chance to keep this whole “the Lord and the disciples” thing going was if Jesus would put up some miraculous last moment resistance at his trial. When I saw that he was going to just give in and turn the other cheek, I thought the best thing I could do would be to sneak off and see if I could get back to Galilee and found a little alumni association for the remnant, but that meant I had to tell a little white lie and tell those people I didn’t even know Jesus, otherwise I would have been arrested, too, and where would that have gotten us?

So as you can see, I did my best as numero uno disciple to make our Lord be the Lord he was destined to be. But it was all for naught, because when push came to shove Jesus wouldn’t shove back and they hanged him on a cross and that was that.

Until he appeared to us. And even when I saw him it didn’t sink in that not only were things *not ruined*, but Jesus was actually Lord forever now in such a way that he could never ever be taken away again from me, or from anyone.

I guess it didn’t really hit me until that time by the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus took me aside and asked point blank, “Do you love me?” By the third time, I think I was getting the point. I had loved *my idea of him*, not *him*. That had to change. And when it changed, the whole game changed. Ironically, in that same moment he led me to understand that I would eventually die *for him*. My worst fears, until then, had been that a) Jesus would die, and b) Peter would die. And there on the beach, after my last, best catch of fish, I finally gave up being old Simon and started being the rock (Cephas, or Peter) that Jesus had dubbed me years before.

It hit me that morning by Galilee that because Jesus rose from the dead, and because I loved that resurrected Jesus, **I who had been Jesus’ biggest disappointment** (well, maybe after Judas) **was beloved of God, a child of God, part of the eternal kingdom.** Boy, that was good news I could sell.

I am Paul.

Nobody hated Jesus more than I did. I hated Jesus the way Peter loved him. Sure, Jesus had opponents before me. But they had failed, whereas I was going to succeed in quenching that so-called movement. They called it “the Way,” but I was going to put away the Way.

I knew the strength that comes with being pure. It was if I had been groomed from a child for the task of overcoming the Jesus thing. I was “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee”—that was me.

Nobody but nobody who set light by the traditions of God’s people should get away with it. And it looked like the survivors of Jesus were not going to be talked out of spreading the rumors about his being raised from the dead. If reasonable people didn’t work together to nip

this in the bud, there was no telling how much damage might be done to our nation, which had enough trouble anyway being a Roman colony and all.

I didn't exactly stone Stephen the Christian, but the participants checked their robes with me, so I suppose I could take a little credit. But when the virus spread away from Jerusalem to Damascus and places like that, I felt I should take control. I got warrants from the authorities and off I set to find some Christians. I planned to **take them bound to Jerusalem**, where they could be dealt with. Probably the way Stephen had been dealt with. The nation needed a good cleanup, after Jesus had done so much to encourage impurity.

He had been a good man in some ways, but you can't go around acting like there isn't a difference between good people and bad people, the way Jesus did. Gosh, he would eat a meal with anybody!

I would "bring them bound" to Jerusalem, those new Christians.

And then it hit me. On the way to Damascus, I saw the light. You might say I had a "Damascus Road" experience.

Jesus asked me a really pointed question: "Saul, Saul . . ." (That was my old name.) "Why are you persecuting me?"

Interesting question.

Why was I persecuting *him*? He was dead! I wasn't persecuting him, I was persecuting his followers.

But the voice said "me." "Why are you persecuting me?" As if, by persecuting them, I was persecuting not them but Jesus himself.

And he seemed to be asking what specifically I had against him.

And it hit me that I who had always tried so hard to be God-pleasing was actually angry with God, and I was taking it out on Jesus. It upset me that Jesus allowed sinners to receive what I had to work so hard to earn— the approval of God. That hurt! It devalued my efforts. So by persecuting Jesus, I was aiming to cut off the love of God from the people who needed it most! This made me, in a terrible twist of irony, not a disciple of God but an enemy of God! I wasn't the best kind of person, I was the worst!

Well, when that hit me it was as if my whole world came to an end. I knew nothing. I saw nothing. I had to be rebuilt from zero.

Not that I'm sorry. I'm glad that Easter hit me so hard, and so personally, and so effectively. Because working for God should never mean "bringing people bound" to Jerusalem, or

Wittenberg, or Chicago, or to church, or anywhere. The Gospel about Jesus Christ is not about tying people up, but about setting them free. **Nobody and nothing sets people free from what ties them up as powerfully as the love of God in Jesus Christ, his Son**, who works by his Holy Spirit even through old tied-up guys like me. That was good news I could sell.

Let me tell you from experience. It is a wonderful thing, when Easter hits you.

Amen.

