

**A sermon preached at St. Martin's-In-the Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia South Carolina
on the Third Sunday of Easter
22 April 2007**

Acts 9:1-20

Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-19

I trudged on the treadmill, watching the crawl for the hundredth time across the bottom of the screen. The police, in camo and Kevlar, fan out again across the campus. The ambulances pull up to the curb again, in solemn chaos. The news correspondents speculate again, the University staff, confused and defensive again. Every eye in the gym was on CNN. Even the tough guys on the free weights, the bang-bang-bang of their iron ingots echoing amidst gasps and sniffles. Finally I could take it no more and closed my eyes, letting my music wash over me.

I had my iPod on shuffle which, if my ear buds were ever in your ears, you'd probably find disconcerting. You'd hear Robert Earl Keen twang about how the waitress got the new Mercedes and Sonny got the chair, followed by The Shin's deadpanning "There is a numbness in your heart and it's growing." Frank Sinatra's *One for the Road*, melting into Springsteen's *Devils and Dust*. In some weird electronic probability warp, the iPod kept repeating Rickie Lee Jones moaning "You cry to the God who leaves you there to the branch and the bird and the empty air, to the God of why can't we turn back around." I guess it doesn't hurt you too badly to know that one of your clergy is seriously warped musically.

I probably share my distress with some or all of you. Because here we are, in Eastertide, trying to figure out how to say "Alleluia," when all we can manage is a baleful *Kyrie Eleison*. How does Good Friday dare to lurch into our Easter? What happened to Resurrection hope? Is it all just a tragic joke, a grand conspiracy of the cosmos to remind us that we are but dust? Where is God when beautiful young people, full of promise and hope are suddenly, brutally, cut-down by one of their own? When a world-renowned engineer, who survived the horrors of the Holocaust, meets it again in the face of a young madman?

Parents hold their children a little closer today. Teenagers think maybe the old people aren't really so bad after all. College students call home, for once not even mentioning how low they are on money. We're all holding on tight this week, tragedy rending our carefully crafted lives. But the questions remain, and as a people formed by Spirit and Story, we listen for the Spirit's voice, and dig deep in the Story to try to uncover the answers.

There is Saul, still breathing murder, thrown to the ground on the road to Damascus. He's the quintessential young lawyer, who's already made partner, on his way to a brilliant political career. But Saul's great conversion is tinted red with the blood of Stephen who lay dying in a ditch outside Jerusalem. The cries of those Saul had imprisoned unjustly would echo though the rest of his life. He would suffer greatly for the Name of the Risen One. Saul was resurrected as the Great Apostle, but his clothes would always carry a faint aroma of death.

There is the Choir of the Universe, every creature and planet, every star and amoeba, every cedar and seashell, singing the doxology, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” But, John of Patmos reminds us they are singing to the “Lamb who was slaughtered.” Even the Great Throne Room of Heaven cannot escape the reality that resurrection requires death, that salvation is another way of saying “your suffering is redeemed.”

And finally there is the beach on Tiberias Lake. The fishermen have returned to their nets, since they have decided that, while it’s really great that Jesus is somehow alive, they’ve got to eat. The only problem is, they seemed to have lost their angling skills.

It’s been a long night, and they’ve hauled the heavy, dripping cast net back into the boat a hundred times, only to pick out seaweed and trash that settled long ago on the mucky bottom. It’s nearly dawn and the tide is edging them closer to the shore. Their muscles ache in the cold morning air. Simon, his clothes dripping with cold water, strips them off and tosses the net one more time.

That’s when they hear the man on the shore calling to them. “Hey, boys! You got any fish?”

They look at each other in annoyance. Do we look like we have any fish? Would we still be out here in this freezing morning air if we had any fish? “No!” they shout back at the stranger.

“Well, throw the net on the other side of the boat!” Apparently they looked like idiots. They’d been fishing both sides of the boat, all night. The fish weren’t running. Maybe when the full moon came back around in a couple weeks. But right now, this place was dead. Still, they shrug their shoulders. What’s one last cast when your shoulders ache this badly and your teeth are chattering so loudly that you can’t even think? The net has hardly hit the water when they feel the lines grow taut. They fight and struggle and grapple with each other, trying to haul it back in.

John, half-whispering, croaks, “It’s Jesus!” But of course, they all already know that. And Simon Peter, realizing that he is buck-naked, jumps into the icy-cold water to hide his embarrassment.

Later, on the beach, none of them ask the stranger who he is, even though he only vaguely looks like Jesus. Or maybe he doesn’t look like Jesus at all. Still, there’s not a scintilla of doubt: this is Jesus, once again inexplicably in their midst. When they’ve eaten the last bite of toasted pita and smoked tilapia, Jesus looks at Simon, whose hair is still hanging wet across his brow.

“So, Simon Johnson, do you love me more than the rest of these guys?”

Simon looks pained, the memory of his still raw treachery stuck in his windpipe. “Yes, Jesus,” he says softly, “you know I love you.”

Jesus smiles. “Then feed my lambs.”

And he asks him again, and again Simon Peter tries to reassure Jesus (and no doubt, himself) that yes, he loves him. And again, the new-old Jesus says, “Well, then, tend my sheep.”

Jesus looks deep within him and Simon is feeling naked all over again. “Simon Johnson, do you love me?”

Simon Peter feels his heart break. “Jesus, you know everything that there is to know. You know me better than I know myself. You know that I love you.”

Jesus’ voice is full of deep mystery. “Feed my sheep.” And then he says something even stranger than all the other strange things he had said that morning on the beach of Tiberias Lake. “Peter, when you were young, you used to you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished, and do whatever you wanted. 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.”

Peter just looks at him as the waves lap against the shore. Jesus finally breaks the silence. “Follow me.”

Follow me? Hadn’t Peter followed him? Hadn’t they trekked across the whole of Judea and back down that terrible day into Jerusalem? Hadn’t he been at the tomb, in the upper room, and now, here on this beach, ready to do whatever it was that Jesus should ask?

He didn’t understand Jesus’ cryptic message and probably wouldn’t for another third of a century. Until the day came, when the Romans tied him upside-down to a cross and slaughtered him just like they had slaughtered the One he’d followed all the way to the Coliseum.

Following the Lamb who was slaughtered means living a life dripping with the remains of the slaughterhouse floor. It means living fully into the human condition, aware that suffering and pain have not been magically carted away under Jesus’ funeral pall. It means feeling pain and rage and terror. It means sharing the passion of the Christ, that is also the passion of Blacksburg and the passion of Baghdad. It means being able to look at the person who has betrayed you, and saying, “Do you love me?” And forgiving them when they don’t.

When the fullness of human tragedy comes blasting across our television screens, our temptation is to ask “Where’s Jesus?” When our hearts are crushed under the pain of senseless death, under the banality of evil, under the raw, festering, bleeding wound of hate, we are so quick to look around for Jesus, forgetting that’s him, dying on the

classroom floor. That's him blown to pieces by a bomb in old white Toyota. That's him being raped on the dirt floor of a Sudanese hut. That's him, martyred again and again.

He's in the suffering of the world, and that's why we have to be in it too. It's why we have to keep looking at those who have named themselves our enemies, who view us as only depraved monsters worthy of eternal blackness, and hand them a piece of bread, with a smile and a prayer that says, "Do you love me?"

It is quite tempting to put the horror of Virginia Tech into a special category of suffering, since the people who died looked like our children, our grandchildren, our sisters, our brothers--like people we love--and we cannot bear the thought of anyone we love suffering. As tempting as that may be, we are reminded by Jesus' prophecy to Peter that even after Easter the old creation still suffers, and it is into that suffering that we are called to follow Jesus. Into the suffering of the world, comforting the broken hearts with the love of Jesus.

It may sound like weakness, this love in the wake of hate, but it is the strength of the Cross, the strength made perfect in the Resurrection. The Reverend Fred Rogers, the man who asked millions of young children, "won't you be my neighbor?" once put it like this:

Confronting our feelings and giving them appropriate expression always takes strength, not weakness. It takes strength to acknowledge our anger, and sometimes more strength yet to curb the aggressive urges anger may bring and to channel them into nonviolent outlets. It takes strength to face our sadness and to grieve and to let our grief and our anger flow in tears when they need to. It takes strength to talk about our feelings and to reach out for help and comfort when we need it.

Fred Rogers knew that strength because he knew the Risen Jesus. He knew how to love him and how to follow him. Just the way that Simon Johnson and Saul of Tarsus learned.

That's our Story. Though we may dig around deep in it for answers, we might well miss them. Because at the bottom of the well we've dug, there is only a question, burning bright on a charcoal fire.

Do you love me?