

**“The Same But Different”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade**  
**The Third Sunday of Easter**  
**April 18, 2010**  
**Scripture: John 20:19-31**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Risen Christ, whose absence leaves us paralyzed but whose presence is overwhelming, breath on us with your abundant life, and open the eyes of our faith, that we might grow in our faith, deepen our discipleship and share our joy with all we meet. Amen.*

Can you believe it has only been two weeks since Easter? Easter Sunday was great! I hope you were here. Even though, a number of our congregation attended the Sunrise service on the causeway, we had a whole crowd of people at both services here in the sanctuary. The music was wonderful. The sanctuary was beautiful. But now what? According to the liturgical calendar, we are still in the Easter Season, but it is not easy to feel Easter two weeks later, is it? Boundless joy and bright hopes have quickly given way to the humdrum of daily life: taxes, health issues, family responsibilities, vocational questions.

Since that is the case, we can pretty easily identify with the disciples in today’s gospel reading. Where are they? Well, they are back at work. They are back doing what they did before Jesus called them. They are fishing.

They followed him for three years. They saw him crucified, dead and buried and then they saw him in the upper room after his resurrection. And after all that – what was their response? They went fishing. Peter said, let’s go fishing, so they packed up their gear and returned to their boats. They went back to their old way of life – back to what they knew. Jesus called them to something new and different – they wanted to stay the same.

It always feels safer to go back to the familiar rather than venturing out into God’s unknown. We want to continue what we know

instead of taking the personal risk of trying something new. We want immediate results that we can see and feel. We want something tangible. We want to go fishing where we cast out our line and we either catch fish or we don’t. It’s obvious. It’s secure. So, as much as we might not want to admit it, we understand the disciples’ decision, don’t we?

The only thing is, Jesus had other ideas. They may have wanted to go back to their old lives, but Jesus seeks them there in the middle of their everyday lives, and he blesses them in a way that is both unexpected and seemingly more than anything for which they could ever have hoped.

Of all of them, though, Simon Peter was the one who received the biggest blessing. Ever since that fateful night when Jesus was betrayed, Peter has been carrying around a heavy feeling of guilt. His deep need to be forgiven for the three times he denied Jesus is brought to the surface as Jesus says to him three times, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” And with each response, Peter’s feeling of forgiveness and responsibility increase. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

How many times have we wavered in our faith journey? How many times have we had some kind of encounter with Jesus, then denied the impact it had in our lives? How many times have we denied him and then swallowed the guilt, and simply gone back to life as we knew it before we met him? And how many times have we denied ourselves the chance to really know the transforming power of his love in our lives?

Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me? Do you love me more than these?” One possible interpretation of what Jesus was asking here is, “Do you love me more than these boats and fishing nets? Do you love me more than this way of life? Do you love me more than the safety all this represents? Do you love me enough to give all this up? Do you love me, Peter? Do you love me more than these?”

One night in New York, on Broadway, the great star Mary Martin was preparing to go on stage, just as she had 1000 times before, in Rogers

and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*. Just before she took stage a note was handed to her. The letter was signed by Oscar Hammerstein who was that evening on his death bed. The note was short. It simply said: “Dear Mary, a bell’s not a bell until you ring it. A song’s not a song until you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love isn’t love ‘til you give it away.”

When the play was over the cast rushed to her backstage and asked, “What happened? We have never seen you perform that way before?” Mary read to them Hammerstein’s note and said, “Tonight, I gave my love away.”

Jesus loved Peter for who he was; he forgave him for what he had done, and now he wanted him to be the same, but different. “Do you love me more than these?” Jesus asked him. I can imagine Peter hesitating over that answer. I can imagine that it took him a minute or two as he thought about all that it meant – thinking about what he was giving up – thinking about what would be required of him. I can imagine because I have been there. Haven’t you? “Do you love me more than these? More than your old way of life? More than safety? Do you love me enough to step out in faith and take risks?” It’s not an easy answer. It’s not a question we should take lightly.

How do we find the strength to love the Lord more than we love the things in our lives, more than we love being safe and secure? How do we find the strength to leave our old life behind, to step out into the new? The answer is in the question itself – “Do you love me?” Our love of God is the source of the strength we need to change our lives – to be the same, but different.

As I was writing this sermon I chanced to look up at a picture of Jesus standing near the sea holding a fishing net. And he is smiling. I love this picture of Jesus, because it helps me to remember how human he was. But until I looked at it as I was writing this sermon, I had never thought about in what context the picture existed. Do you think it is possible that Jesus was smiling at Peter when he met him and the disciples out fishing that day? “Do you love me Peter? Do

you love me more than these?”

Our other New Testament reading this morning from the book of Acts has similarities to our Gospel story. First of all, you recognize, I'm sure that the main characters in both stories are two of the best known people in the New Testament. Each of them is someone whom we recognize as having great faith, and great courage. Even more than that, though, what they have in common is that God wanted both of them to be more than what they were – the same, but different.

We first met Paul by his other name, Saul. We know him to be an almost fanatical persecutor of those who followed Jesus and his disciples. We know that he had witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen and then had gone on a personal crusade against Christians in Jerusalem, invading the privacy of their homes and hauling them away to prison. In the story we heard this morning, Saul had obtained orders from the chief priest to travel to Damascus to continue his persecution.

Just as he was nearing Damascus, there is suddenly a flash of light so brilliant in intensity that he and his companions were thrown to the ground. And Saul is blinded. Then the light is followed by a voice telling him that he is an enemy of God, engaged in warfare against God's own people. When Saul asks for the voice's identification, the speaker identifies himself as Jesus. And Jesus tells him to go to the city where he will be told what to do.

The one who has been giving orders is now on the receiving end. And we know that before long he will see with his eyes again, but we also know that the eyes of his soul will be enlightened as well. And we know, too, that before long Saul of Tarsus will become Paul the Apostle.

God loved Paul for who he was, warts and all, and he wanted him to always be the same, but he wanted him to be different, too. He wanted him to live with and to share, not the law of the Lord, but the love of the Lord!

Have you ever stopped to think what the

church would be like if Paul had stayed Saul? Have you ever wondered what the church would be like if Peter had been unwilling to give up fishing to become a shepherd? Both Peter and Paul wanted to stay the same, but God had other ideas. And no matter how hard they tried to stay the same, God never gave up on them. He continued to work in them so that could work through them.

There was a minister once who had a cat named Percy who was a fighting tomcat. Every few months or so, the moon would be just right, and Percy would throw himself wholeheartedly into a midnight rumble. And every time Percy would limp home with torn ears and scratched eyes – bleeding but self-satisfied. More often than not, Percy would require the care of a veterinarian. The problem was that these medical visits did not always fit easily into the minister's budget.

Now you can imagine that there were quite a few people who had suggestions regarding Percy. Some said give him away. Some said put him to sleep. The minister, though, would not even entertain those suggestions. As hard as it was to watch Percy as he continued to fight, and as much as he wanted him to change, the man would never give up on him. The minister's problem was that he loved Percy.

And God's problem is that he loves us just as he loved Peter and Paul. We limp home like Percy- exhausted and torn, but as hard as it is for God to watch as we struggle and fight, he will never give up on us. We claim to believe the story of Easter that Jesus rose from the dead that we might understand love. But how often does that belief show in the way we live?

The song of Easter is one which melts our hearts and inspires us to love God and God will continue to work in us that he might work through us – that the forgiving love he gives us will be the forgiving love we give to others, because, “love in your heart is not put there to stay; love isn't love until you give it away.”

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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