

“Feed My Lambs, Feed My Sheep”

Luke 24:36b-48

The Rev. Dn. Nancy Casey Fulton

April 15, 2018

*May my words be a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.*

And Jesus said to them, “Feed my lambs; feed my sheep.”

These past weeks we have celebrated with Jesus and his disciples many meals, beginning with Maundy Thursday, and continuing today in the Gospel of Luke. It is the day of the resurrection, and the disciples are gathered in the upper room, talking about the story they have just heard, that Jesus appeared to two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They did not recognize him until he joined them for a meal. When he blessed and broke bread, then vanished from their sight, they realized that they had seen the risen Jesus.

As the disciples continue to marvel at this account, Jesus is suddenly standing among them. They are “startled and terrified . . . [thinking that] they are seeing a ghost.” To calm their anxious spirits, Jesus invites them to touch him, to see his hands and feet, for a “ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” As they stand awestruck, Jesus asks whether they have anything to eat. The disciples, who are for the most part fishermen, offer him a piece of broiled fish that they have on hand. As at Emmaus, Jesus shows himself in the blessing and eating of food, a sure sign that he is human. Perhaps the disciples also remember at this profound moment that Jesus blessed loaves and fishes for the 5,000 gathered on the hillside to hear his message.

Some time later, perhaps a week or two after the resurrection, some of the disciples—John names seven, including Thomas—return to the Sea of Galilee to take up their old occupation. They do not know what else to do with themselves, for Jesus has not yet given them instruction and blessing to preach in his name. This liturgical year, we do not hear

John's account of this gathering at the sea shore on any of the Sundays of Easter, though it is appointed the Gospel for Friday in Easter Week. But I want to speak of it, because it deepens today's Gospel from Luke, with its image of the disciples giving Jesus some broiled fish to eat.

John writes that the disciples have fished all night, but have caught nothing. At daybreak, they see Jesus on the shore, but they do not recognize him. Seeing that they have caught no fish, Jesus shows them where to toss their nets, and they eventually catch so much fish that they swamp their boat. Once they have jumped into the sea and dragged their bursting nets to the shore Jesus invites them to "come and have breakfast." He takes bread, and the fish he has grilled, and gives it to them, telling them to feed his lambs, feed his sheep. Do as I did on the hillside: speak to the people, feed them with my word.

I am always overwhelmed by the tenderness of Jesus in this scene on the shore: "come and have breakfast." Come and have the meal that strengthens you in body and spirit for the days ahead. He loves these men who have sacrificed so much to follow him through three years on the roads of Galilee. Jesus knows they are broken men. They have failed him in his hour of need. But he still has work for them to do. And so, foreseeing the sorrow and suffering they will endure, he gives them the tools they will need to sustain them as they draw others into his prophetic message. He gives them the strength they will need to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, speak out against injustice. Strength to spread into the world the message that will continue to gather broken men and women of every generation. For some of them, strength to suffer and die for his sake.

But what of us, nearly 2,000 years removed from these miraculous—and yet earthy—events? Are they simply a myth about a powerful prophet whose life, death, and resurrection shaped the course of human history? Or are they a deep truth about the meaning of life in God, a stunning reminder that God loves us, and that God is incarnate in every one of us?

Unlike the people of Palestine in the day of Jesus, we have never experienced his actual physical presence: his voice, his touch, his smile, his breath. But we have earthy reminders of his presence: bread and wine, the waters of baptism, the oil of anointing. We have our own hands, undoubtedly shaped in the image of God's hands, and with these hands we dry tears. We embrace family and friends in illness and in grief. We make bread for Sunday's service, and we bless that bread and place it in outstretched hands. When the service is over, we take that bread and wine to those who cannot join us in.

We wield a hammer for a Habitat house, and we carry food into the homeless shelter. We place on the altar bouquets for Sunday, then take them to a parishioner who is lonely or ill. We knit, crochet, or weave a prayer shawl for someone who needs tangible assurance that God is always with us.

In his last earthly days with the disciples, Jesus commanded them to make disciples of all nations. He assured them that he would be with them "always, to the end of the age." 2,000 years later we can look back and see what a rough road it has been. But we remain hopeful, especially in this season of Easter, as we immerse ourselves in the resurrection of Jesus. The grey Lenten season past, we have comforting stories to renew our strength: the disciples on the road to Emmaus, in the upper room, at the Sea of Galilee. We hear the stories and know that we are the lambs; we are the sheep. And we give thanks.