

Fifth Sunday in Eastertide  
6 May 2007  
Church of the Savior – Episcopal  
Orange City, Iowa  
Rev. Dr. Karen Wacome, Presiding  
Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preaching

Acts 13.44-52  
Psalm 145  
Revelation 19.1, 4-9  
John 13.31-35

*May the words of my mouth  
And the meditations of our hearts  
Be acceptable in your sight, O God  
Our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

*You will look for me...where I am going you cannot come. John 13.33*

### **Looking For Jesus**

One Sunday afternoon down by the river, a drunk stumbles into a baptismal service. Unsteadily, he walks out into the water and stands next to the preacher. The minister takes him by the arm and says, "*Mister, are you ready to find Jesus?*" The drunk says, "*Yes, preacher, I sure am.*" The minister dunks him under the water and pulls him right back up. "*Have you found Jesus?*" the preacher asks. "*No, I didn't!*" says the drunk. The preacher then dunks him under for a bit longer, brings him up, and says, "*Now, brother, have you found Jesus?*" "*Noooo, I have not, reverend.*" The preacher, in disgust, holds the man under, this time for half a minute. Finally, he brings him out of the water, and asks "*My God, man, have you found Jesus yet?*" The drunk, gasping for air and wiping his eyes, asks the preacher, "*Are you sure this is where he fell in?*"

For those of us who grew up as evangelicals, the words, "*finding Jesus*" are familiar and resonant. To find Jesus is to be saved, to be converted, to repent. If anyone has a hard time finding Jesus, it's because he's too comfortable with his sins. Jesus is there to be found, waiting for the sinner, not elusive, not playing hard to get. So what Jesus says

here in John's gospel is disconcerting: "*You will look for me, but you won't find me!*" Here Jesus is talking to his disciples, but he reminds them that he said the same thing to "the Jews." Of course, they're all *Jews*; what Jesus tells his Galilean disciples is that he told the *Judeans*, and by connotation the sophisticated, religiously well-connected people from Jerusalem, that they'd seek, but not find, him. The incident is back in chapter seven, where these words are Jesus' response to the Pharisees who, realizing that the crowds are beginning to see Jesus as the messiah, order his arrest. So what a strange thing for Jesus to say to his friends: "*You will look for me but you won't find me...just like those Pharisees who wanted to arrest me and put me to death.*" Some seek Jesus because they hate him. Some seek Jesus because they love him. Yet Jesus seems to lump them all together. As if, wherever he's going, it's somewhere where even *that* difference doesn't matter.

I think this strange thing Jesus says connects to the "new commandment" he proceeds to give: "*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" What's striking about this command is where John records Jesus giving it. Today's brief text comes right *after* the scene in which Jesus predicts that one of them is going to betray him and then sends Judas out into the night. And it comes right *before* the scene where Jesus predicts that Simon Peter will deny him three times before the next morning. So this is who he commands to love one another: people whose salient characteristic right now is not love, but betrayal and denial.

Here, as in many other places, it's important to pay as much attention to what Jesus does as what he says. For he enacts his own words. When Jesus tells them that one of them will betray him, Peter draws Jesus aside and whispers, "*Who is it?*" and Jesus identifies his betrayer by dipping a piece of bread in the dish and giving it to Judas. Keep in mind the general significance of eating together for these people. Table fellowship was the sign of mutual acceptance. It was what the decently religious Jew could never imagine doing with Gentiles, and what the fastidious Jew would avoid doing with anyone even a bit careless about the law. Jesus and his disciples were from the start in hot water with the Pharisees because they were so wanton about who they ate with. Those years of Jesus' public ministry were a moveable feast where the guests were crooks, traitors and whores. And then there's this particular meal. It's the last meal Jesus eats with the disciples before his death. It's the meal we re-enact each Sunday with the consecrated bread and wine. It's no exaggeration to say that Judas has just received the Eucharistic bread from Jesus himself. (In light of this, I don't know what people are thinking when they deny a place at *Jesus'* table to the unbaptized, or to the badly behaved!)

It's as though Jesus is saying, "*Here, I'll show you how to deal with those who betray you!*" and then does the last thing imaginable: breaks bread with him, shares a meal with him, shares his life with him. Jesus commands them to love one another, and he has just *showed* them what he means. He creates fellowship where the only reasonable thing is condemnation. He calls to communion where the only reasonable thing is exclusion.

As I mentioned, the text immediately after Jesus gives his new command is the one where he tells Peter he will deny him. I think it testifies to the care with which John has

constructed his gospel that in his concluding chapter he ties Peter's personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus back to this scene. It's at that breakfast on the beach, after the disciples have been out all night on the lake and finally landed the 153 fish. Once again, Jesus is giving bread to his disciples, sharing a meal with them. When they finish eating, Jesus talks to Peter. There's no recrimination, just a question, posed three times: does Peter love him? Three times Peter says yes, but we know that Peter can say one thing and do another. "*Peter, show me that you love me. Feed my sheep. Do what I've done with you. Do what I did with Judas. Do what we did with the scorned and rejected sinners of Israel. Feed them. Eat with them. Don't hate and condemn and exclude but forgive and include and love. If you want to love me, love them. If you want to find me, you'll find them*"

If you go looking for Jesus, really looking for him, not for some imaginary Jesus of faded religious piety, but Jesus the friend of sinners, Jesus the crucified criminal, you won't find him, you'll find someone else. He's gone away and left someone in his place for you to find. Often, not someone you especially *want* to find. Not someone who can give you what you think you need, but someone who needs something from you. Someone not attractive or loveable or simpatico, not someone you really want to forgive and include and share a meal—or a life—with. You'll find the likes of Judas the betrayer and Peter the denier and your world's equivalent of tax collectors, harlots and sinners, and worse of all, a whole lot of latter-day Pharisees who smugly will assure you *they've* found Jesus. Like them, I'd prefer to have my own personal Jesus, but if I want to be his disciple, I have to obey this one impossible command to love these people.

A few days after the scene in today's text, the disciples, ashamed and confused, are called out of hiding by Mary Magdalene and the other women, and run to Jesus' tomb. It is empty. The Lord is risen! This Easter season we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, and that is our great joy. As Lynn read at the Vigil from Chrysostom's glorious Easter sermon:

*Rejoice today for the Table is richly laden!*

*Feast royally on it, the calf is a fatted one.*

*Let no one go away hungry. Partake, all, of the cup of faith.*

*Enjoy all the riches of His goodness!*

But it's better not to move on to the triumph too quickly. It's a good idea to stop for a moment in the silent emptiness of that tomb, to listen there for his command. The resurrected Jesus is present for us precisely in his absence. An empty place we fill for one another. We might well prefer a palpable presence, a world put to rights, to a hope and a promise and a command to love as recklessly as we have been loved. For it's a dangerous command. A few Easters back, the Archbishop, preaching in Canterbury Cathedral, reminded us:

Jesus rises from the dead so as to find not only his home in heaven but his home in us. He rises so that we may rise out of the prisons of guilt, anxiety, self-obsession or apathy that so constantly close around us. But for this to happen...we have to go on, day after day, getting used to parts of us dying, just as Jesus died: we have to get used to the beloved habits of self-serving and self-protecting being brought into the light that shines from Jesus' face and withering away in that brightness. (11 April 2004)

Can we believe it? Most of us most of the time have to say what Denise Levertov says: “*I doubt and interrupt my doubt with belief*” (“Opening Words”). It can be hard to believe that that tomb was empty, that Jesus lives. But that’s the easier part. What’s harder is believing that Jesus really *means* it, that we really *do* have to love one another, and that it’s the *only* way to know him. That we really do have to betray our loyalty to being right and good and pure and sit at the table with the wicked and unwashed. We’d rather have our questions answered than to be questioned: who are we willing to share our bread with, who are we willing to love? Do we want to find Jesus the one way he can be found? Are we ready to follow him, walking out of the empty tomb into the light? I conclude with words from another Welshman, the poet priest R. S. Thomas:

*There have been times  
when, after long on my knees  
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled  
from my mind, and I have looked  
in and seen the old questions lie  
folded and in place, like the piled  
grave clothes of love’s risen body.* (“The Answer”)

Amen.

