



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Rector

He's Alive—at 9:30 and Throughout the Day

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 14, 2013

The Third Sunday of Easter

Based on John 21:1-19

I spent all day yesterday at a retreat for a diocesan committee that I am on. The facilitator asked each of us to talk a moment about a spiritual hero or heroine in our lives. As you might expect in my line of work, I have met a good number of outstanding and really fancy religious people with special and very elaborate outfits and all sorts of power and other important traits. Some, despite all that, are deeply spiritual and have quite marvelously affected my life. But it was not one of them that I remembered. As I mulled it over, I kept returning to an individual from my distant past, a church lady in fact, who could have single-handedly inspired Dana Carvey's inimitable creation of the "church lady" on *Saturday Night Live*, Baptist bouffant and all. Though she was very active at the First Baptist Church, I never heard her speak about any of the issues the other adults seemed so often to talk about—race relations, what was good or bad about the preacher, or who was doing what to whom. She just loved us kids and took particular interest in those of us who were geeky enough to be involved in something called "Sword Drill," a very involved Bible memory contest that is way too complicated to explain. Just take my word for it: your new Rector was State Winner Perfect three years in a row (a fact which probably explains more things about me than you have any right to know).

Anyway, preparing for this annual statewide event took hours and hours of work. When the state contest drew near, Ms. Lowe would have the six or seven of us still in the running come to her house early in the morning before school to practice. She believed we retained more of what we learned at that hour. She drilled us several days a week with encouragement that I will never forget, celebrating with us when we did well and consoling us when we didn't, with never a sharp word to any one of us (though each of us probably deserved one a time or two). At the end of our early sessions, she would fete us with a marvelous homemade breakfast. Along with scrambled eggs and bacon, on each boy's plate there'd be two huge buttered biscuits, only one for the girls—this was in the sixties and gender equality had not yet come to Mississippi. We'd load the biscuits up with honey, and all felt right with the world.

She was not a fancy lady; most of us came from nicer neighborhoods with finer houses. With no self-consciousness, though, about such superficial things, she threw her door open as our parents let us out of the car each time we arrived and gave us a big hug in her simple housedress. Honestly I never felt more loved or accepted than I did at those times; and though I never exactly thought, "Well, she is like Jesus," I knew that something was right and good around her table that was more important than simple food.

I thought about that feeling this week when reading for the millionth time this post-resurrection story about Jesus and the disciples. Probably not incidentally since this story came from John's community, it was the Beloved Disciple, John, who first recognized that it was Jesus standing on the seashore; but by the time they were eating the fish he had grilled and the bread he had gathered, they all knew who he was. The scripture says that when Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast," none of the disciples needed to ask who he was because they knew. Breakfasts are like that. Generally the only people we eat with at that hour are people we really love. The "power breakfast" was a couple of millennia away at this point. The intimacy was so present that they just knew. Sometimes we do: we just know. We don't have to be told; we don't have to check the historical facts to be sure. We just know.

That is how I feel about this story of Jesus on the shore of the sea. This entire chapter is an add-on to the gospel of John, written later than the original portion and almost certainly by a different writer. In the early life of the church, it was increasingly important that there be stories which claimed Jesus' victory over the grave, his having not been stopped by a horrific

act of the Roman government. A living Savior, of course, was much more compelling than one who died, certainly one who had died such an ignominious death on a cross near a garbage dump. How better to present a more victorious picture than to include some eyewitness accounts of encounters with Jesus after his resurrection? And if the next question on any of our lips is “did it really happen?” we are asking the wrong question. When and if pushed, I can give an answer; but, again, listen to me: That is really the wrong question. The best answer is that it has never stopped happening and that it never will.

I studied this passage again in depth this week, revisiting the definitive work on John by the now deceased New Testament scholar Raymond Brown. He joined many before him in parsing every word of this gospel, devoting huge amounts of brainpower, ink and now cyber space to finding meaning in every word. You wouldn't believe, or maybe you would, how much attention has been given to the comment that Peter was naked in the boat. Was night fishing on the Sea of Tiberius clothing optional, some have wondered? Well, of course not; that would have been totally abhorrent in Jewish culture. Peter was almost certainly in a loincloth over which he respectfully placed his outer garments before swimming to see the man whom John had recognized as Jesus. I suppose that needs to be said, since nakedness gets us all pretty nervous. There has also been a great deal made, to no real avail, of the oddly specific number of fish caught: 153. What did it mean, a secret code? In the 5th Century St. Augustine said all that really needs to be said, “It's a great mystery and a whole lot of fish.”

All this intense biblical scholarship is important in its way, and it is certainly interesting. But how we appropriate scripture, and particularly its details, is in the end a matter of the heart—our heart, more than the brain. The truth of the resurrection is really important to us, and it needs to be. But it doesn't have anything to do with whether this story or any of the resurrection stories has a discernible root in history. These stories, and in truth the entire collection of gospel narratives, are a part of a tradition that came to be written and believed about Jesus after his death. They point us to truths that are eternal rather than historical, empowering us to make claims like the one I am about to make: I know that Christ is risen because I know him in my heart. I don't follow all the things that Christ tugs me toward and in fact sometimes act as though I hardly know him; but in the dark of the night, I know what is true in a way that finds expression in stories of an empty tomb and appearances on long ago seashores that aren't remotely dependent upon any historical factoid. Christ, which is my way (and many others' way) of speaking of the spirit of God is either alive in and with us or not.

I treasure these stories and anyone who says I don't or tries to take them away from me is itching for a fight. But I treasure them for what they are: important faith stories about a living Christ, who still stands on a metaphorical and increasingly close seashore ready to feed us with the food we most desperately need if we just walk toward him. When Jesus kept asking Peter if he loved him, he was giving us all a message: The abundance represented by that big catch and the breakfast Jesus had cooked provide a lesson for us—that none of God's children are to be any hungrier than we are, which is to say not very hungry at all. Last week when I was driving across the rural south getting my mother situated in a new place, I came upon a sign in front of a little country church. As I saw it coming down the road, I prepared to be ticked off, as is most often the case when I encounter such signs. What it said, though making me laugh, also made me think, “Well, maybe so.” The sign said, “Happy Easter. He came back from the dead! Meet him this Sunday at 9:30.”

I can't be that specific about the time of his appearance, but this much I know, my friends: It is still Easter. And our stories are huge and our mission is even greater. Christ is alive and calls to each one of us, “Follow me.”

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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