

An Epic of Love, by Tim HallO

The Third Sunday of Easter, Year C, 1 May 2022

[RCL:] Acts 9:1-6, (7-20); Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.”

The Easter season is all about the resurrection of Jesus. On Easter Sunday the women are returning to the sealed tomb to perform the burial rites that were left unfinished on that frightful Friday afternoon. His mother Mary and his friends, Mary Magdalene and Joanna, coming with sorrow and weeping to say their final goodbyes to the one they can't believe is gone. How could his life and ministry have led to this point, his mother wonders and as Cindy so powerfully embodied in her midrash homily on Good Friday.

But the stone has been rolled away and his body is gone! And two men in dazzling clothes appear and ask them why are they weeping and looking for the living among the dead. Don't they remember what Jesus told them? That the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and suffer death upon the cross... in order to rise again on the third day? Now it all comes clear... the story of Jesus' life was always leading to this point... no more suffering, but JOY in the risen Lord.

Still, no one has seen him... yet.

But then, as we read last week, later on that same day, after the women had discovered the empty tomb and told the disciples, and Peter had run to the tomb to see it for himself, Jesus appears to them all. Even when they were hiding, huddled in fear behind locked doors, Jesus lets himself in. As Josette recounted in her homily last Sunday, love finds a way in, even through locked doors and locked hearts. Love trumps fear. And by the next week, just so Thomas can get it too, Jesus shows up again. He comes for the many. And he comes for the one. He loves all his sheep. Only this time the doors of the house are only shut, not locked. Progress.

And now, this third week of Easter, the floodgates are open wide. Jesus is everywhere! He appears to Saul and stops him dead in his tracks on the road to Damascus, where Saul is going to persecute the new followers of The Way, with marching orders signed by the high priest. And all those traveling with him witness the flash of bright light from heaven, hear the voice of Jesus, and see Saul struck down and blinded.

Then, to complete this amazing conversion, the Lord appears to Ananias, a disciple in The Way, and tells him to go lay hands on Saul that he might regain his sight. Ananias, along

with everyone else, knows that Saul has been persecuting the new Christians in Jerusalem and has come to Damascus to do the same. “Breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” as our reading says. But even though he is much afraid, he does as the Lord requests, stepping outside his comfort zone, trusting that love will overcome fear, to further the spread of the Gospel through the most unlikely of instruments, Saul of Tarsus, soon to be baptized into Christ, a former persecutor and destined to become Paul the Apostle.

An interesting aside here... I was researching whether this was the point when Saul was given the new name, Paul. But found that this never happened. In actuality, [Saul of Tarsus was born a Jew, “circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, or the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee” \(Phil 3:5\). The Hebrew name given him by his parents was Saul, but, because his father was a Roman citizen \(and therefore Saul inherited Roman citizenship\), Saul also had the Latin name Paul, the custom of dual names being common in those days. Since he grew up in a strict Pharisee environment, the name Saul was by far the more appropriate name to go by. But after his conversion, Saul determined to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, so he dusted off his Roman name and became known as Paul, a name Gentiles were accustomed to.](#) Four chapters later, in Acts 13:9, Luke writes, “Saul, also known as Paul” and then calls him Paul from that point onward.

But back to the flood of appearances. John, in his apocalyptic vision in Revelation sees Jesus not only as the Lamb that was slain but now, also, as the Lamb upon the throne in the courts of heaven. To him be “blessing and honor and glory and might... forever and ever.” Someone asked me recently if our Revised Common Lectionary readings include Revelation, a question I found interesting, but couldn’t answer at the time. Now I can give a resounding YES. We will be reading from Revelation for the entire Easter season, with our final reading being on the Last Sunday of Easter at our healing service on the 5th Sunday in May. But I’ll leave it to someone smarter and more visionary than I to preach on this fascinating book.

Finally, Jesus showed himself to his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, a place that was so important to them all for their livelihoods and for all of Jesus’ ministry work that occurred on and around this body of water. They’ve finally come out from behind their locked or shut doors and are returning to work. Getting on with life. Just amazing to me that the risen Lord has appeared to them twice after being crucified and all they can think to do is get back to business. But Jesus is not about to let that happen.

This passage actually takes place several years before Saul's conversion and several decades before John's revelation. And it's an amazing story that we hear this morning. Have a look at the bulletin cover. See all that is going on? This passage lights up the synapses of my brain like a movie trailer.

You've followed Jesus from a babe born in a stable in Bethlehem, pursued by King Herod and forced to flee to Egypt, to his baptism in the Jordan by his cousin, John, through his three years of ministry when he challenged authority and taught many hard lessons, to his persecution and death on a cross. You thought the story was over; a life well lived, but a sad and bitter ending. Now experience the real ending to this Epic of Love. Disciples changed forever. Nets overflowing. Apostles sent forth to change the world.

Many studies focus on the three questions Christ asks Peter on the shore and his admonitions after each of Peter's responses. The syntax of each verb and noun is analyzed... why agape (divine love) and why Philios (Brotherly love). Why tend vs. feed? Why lambs vs. sheep? The icon on our bulletin focuses on Peter, too. You can see Peter labeled on the boat and in the sea, "O Petros", and again on the shore speaking with "O Iesus". The text at the bottom quotes Jesus, "Bosce ta probate mou", Greek for "tend my sheep."

While the message here is wonderful, and one to take to heart, that we should care for one another, both young and old, and feed those who hunger both in body or in spirit, I took away another point. And that is that we are living in a post-resurrection world and we should live our lives knowing that we are. Knowing that we are saved. Knowing that Jesus died for our sins and that he comes to us and will find us where we are. Whether at work (i.e. the disciples fishing on the sea), hiding behind locked doors, or on the road with a completely different agenda.

Notice how this encounter at the Sea of Tiberias has so many vignettes that harken back to earlier stories, but things are just a little different. Earlier, when Jesus came upon the disciples with empty nets he urged them to "go deeper" and they soon found their nets teeming with fish. Then he told them that one day they would be "fishers of people". Today they don't have to go any deeper. They just need to try something a little different. And while the nets are full again, they have no problem bringing the harvest home.

And Peter jumping into the sea. The last time he did this he almost drowned because his faith was not strong enough. This time he has no problem reaching Jesus and joining him for breakfast and conversation on the shore.

And the breakfast that is prepared... it's like the feeding of the 5,000 on the banks of this very lake. Then, it was a miracle that five loaves and two fishes became enough to feed the multitude. Now, in this post-resurrection time, we know that there is plenty for all, if we but share our catch.

And lastly, Peter is given a chance to answer 3 questions yet again. And where before his fear informed his answers, now, in this post-resurrection time, his faith and love do. Note the personal nature of the questions Jesus asks Peter.

- He did not inquire whether the world, or Israel, or the disciples as a whole loved Him;
- He didn't ask Peter about loving someone else.
- He simply asked Peter, "Do you love me?"

Today, in this great epic of love, each one of us must ask the question: "Do I love Jesus Christ?"

Although love is an invisible entity, its fruits are clearly seen. If we truly love the Lord, we will show this by obeying His Word. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

His commandments are not burdensome, but are the very nature of love itself. Consider the greatest of the commandments. Speaking to the Pharisees in Matthew 22:37-40, he said "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' " That's everything. It's that simple.

And consider the fruit of the Spirit that the reborn Paul shared with the Galatians 5:22-23, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."

God is love and we, as Christians, are to show Love.... But first... we must love Jesus. We cannot truly love our brother or sister, or even our enemy, if we do not truly love Jesus. He showed his love for us and freed us from sin by dying on the cross for us. He comes to us where we are and beckons us to follow him.

Do you love Jesus? How is it manifested in your life? I pray that each one of us can say, as Peter said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." That we will unlock our hearts to him, glory in his risen presence, and continue to take up the epic cross of love and follow him.

~ Amen