

Easter 3C (4/18/10 – Christ’s Threefold Mercy to a Threefold Denier)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

I’d like to simply get something out of the way straight away – the Word we have through the inspired pen of St. John in verse 14 of our *Holy Gospel* text. There we heard: *This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after He was raised from the dead.* [21.14] If you were paying close attention to the reading of the Gospel – and recall what has happened the two Sundays previous – you would be wondering how it is that this is only the **third** appearance of the risen Christ to His disciples. After all, we know that He appeared to Mary Magdalene on that Resurrection Sunday morning; then to the disciples who were locked behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish leaders. Oh, and I nearly forgot His appearance earlier in the late afternoon / early evening to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus ... when *He was known to them in the breaking of the bread* [LK 24.35]. So on Resurrection Sunday we have three appearances already. Add to that His appearance to the disciples the following Sunday – when Thomas was with them ... as we heard last Sunday – and we are up to at least four appearances before we come to the one we have set before us today. So what gives? Is John’s Gospel wrong?

No! (There’s an exclamation point in my text!) The inspired Gospel is not wrong – for **all** of God’s holy Word is *inerrant* ... without error. What we have here is **not** an error – but merely a matter of “referent.” When John says: *This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the DISCIPLES after He was raised from the dead*, the question we must ask to rightly understand – and eliminate the seeming error – is this: to whom does the word “disciples” refer? Is it speaking of the *disciples* in general – all of the believers at that time ... Apostles, men, women, maybe even children? Or is it referring to just some of them – a specific subset of the whole group? The context itself seems to make clear that John is referring to a specific subset of the disciples. After all, in verse 2 we are told: *Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together.* It was this group – a total of only **seven** altogether – to whom the risen Jesus appeared. Not even all of the Apostles are present – four of them are absent. Yet this seems to be the best way to understand what John is saying. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to His *Apostles* as a group – even if some were missing.

John is simply counting Jesus’ resurrection appearances to the Apostles. And

that this is the case is reinforced by what happens after the miraculous catch of 153 large fish – despite having caught nothing during the course of the night, when fishing is usually best – and after the Savior gives His disciples a breakfast of bread and grilled fish. Simon Peter – the bold, outspoken, impetuous Apostles ... who denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed twice [MT 26.74] – is questioned by our Lord three times ... and reinstated into his *apostleship* three times. This is about the *Apostles*. So with this distraction out of the way, we can now return to our text and understand just what is happening in this appearance of our resurrected Savior ... and what it might mean for us nearly 2000 years later.

There are several miracles in our *Gospel*. The first one you perhaps didn't catch – and that's a clue. Before the risen Jesus performs the miracle of the great catch – His second miracle of this sort ... maybe you recall the first one, when Jesus called those fishermen-disciples to be fishers of men ... Apostles. Before He gives this second miraculous catch of fish, Jesus performs the miracle of the great empty net. And that miracle is no less a miracle than the catch – with seven men ... several professional fishermen ... casting the net all night long ... at the best catching time. Yes, that the Lord caused them to come up completely empty-handed was also a miracle. And it teaches us – just as it taught them – that we are **always** empty-handed before the Lord. Luther put it this way: *We are beggars, this is true*. We are spiritual beggars constantly needing ... looking for ... begging for a handout from our gracious Lord. On our own, we **always** come up empty-handed before the Lord. And that was true also of the Apostles of our Lord.

But, admittedly, the miraculous catch is the focus of our attention between the two. And not to deny the literalness of this catch – there were, truly, 153 great fish caught that morning when Jesus told them to ***cast the net on the right of the boat, and you will find some*** [JN 21.6] – there is more to this miracle than that. It is more than Jesus just “plagiarizing” His earlier miracle – although that does seem to be part of the point of this miracle ... so that they learn to believe that He is the risen Christ. The main thing here in our text is that Jesus is reinstating His Apostles ... and not just Peter – though Peter certainly receives special attention from the risen Lord. All of them had forsaken the Lord. All of them had denied Him by running away. All of them had failed to get His resurrection promise – and didn't really believe the women when they reported that Christ was alive. Thomas didn't even believe the other Apostles when they said: ***We have seen the Lord*** [JN 20.25] – as we heard last Sunday.

This is a Law-and-Gospel sort of thing, it seems – this whole passage. The Lord Jesus will first show them their own emptiness before He gives them and fills them with His super-abundant blessing. They must learn that even with their expertise – their experience ... and their calling – it isn't ever **them** ... **about** them. *It is the Lord* [21.7] ... **always**. If that is true of our secular lives, how much more in our spiritual lives! And just as those fishermen were unable to catch fish unless the Lord give it to them, so those fishers of men will not bring into the boat of the Church a great catch of believers no matter how often they throw the net of the Gospel. Paul puts it this way: *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God Who gives the growth.* [1COR 3.6-7] The Apostles will be reinstated – but on Christ's terms. And they must first learn that **all** they do as His Apostles – as His “sent-ones” ... as eye-witnesses of His life of righteousness and His crucifixion to take away the sins of the world and His glorious resurrection to give life and immortality to those who believe – **all** they do as Apostles is the **Lord's** doing through them. They are merely His instruments.

Likewise Peter's threefold reinstatement after his threefold denial is a Law-and-Gospel sort of thing. *Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?* [JN 20.15] Peter had spoken as if he did ... at least thought he did. *Though they all fall away because of You, I will never fall away* [MT 26.33]. That was sinful pride on Peter's part. He wanted to carry through – the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. But when the moment – three moments – of temptation came, he fell ... and emphatically denied that he even knew Jesus ... even invoking a curse upon himself and swearing [MT 26.74]. Simon needed to recognize his sin and repent before hearing the good news of the Gospel. Jesus commands him: *Feed My lambs* [JN 21.15]. This happens three times – once for each denial. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him. Three times Peter affirms his love for Christ. And Jesus says: *Feed My lambs ... Tend My sheep ... Feed My sheep* [21.15-17]. Here we see *Christ's Threefold Mercy to a Threefold Denier* – as if the Lord would say: *Peter, you are reinstated to your apostleship. Continue as a fisher of men ... and undershepherd of the flock.*

And notice that they are **Christ's** lambs, **Christ's** sheep ... just like the fish are His ... and the net is His ... and the boat is His – everything in fact. Whatever the Apostles do – and the Church *built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief Cornerstone* [EPH 2.20] – it is **all** Christ's doing ... from beginning to end!

Now in case the application of all this to **you** isn't clear yet. **You** are Peter ... and the other Apostles. **You** doubt Christ and His work and His promises. **You** run away from Him when times get tough. **You** doubt His resurrection and all its implications for you and your life. **You** grow impatient with waiting for the fulfillment of Christ's Word ... and end up going back to that which is known and comfortable ... giving up hope ... instead of remaining vigilant and patiently trusting all of God's promises. **You** deny Him threefold – in thought, word, and deed. And yet in the same love and compassion, your resurrected Savior comes to **you**, bids **you** cast your net on the right side of the boat of His Church – in the waters teaming with His threefold mercy of forgiveness, life, and salvation. In the same love and compassion, your resurrected Savior comes to **you** and sets a meal before **you** and bids **you** to eat with Him. In the same love and compassion, your resurrected Savior bids **you** to follow Him ... all the way to heaven.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the + SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]