

Table of Grace
John 22:1-19

May 1, 2022, Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager

¹After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Lutheran pastor Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber tells a story about a friend of hers named Bruce. Bruce, years ago, was a Lutheran bishop, who she first met at a conference. Bruce was smart, charming, funny, and personable. Along with leading pastors and churches, every year, Bruce supported a hospital in Indian and lead annual journeys to Israel and Palestine, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, and see the hard work of peacemaking firsthand. Nadia had connected to Bruce more when she found out his wife was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. When she asked Bruce, “who pastors Bishops?” and Bruce said back to her, “no one,” she knew she was called to keep checking in and praying for and loving Bruce through his wife’s illness and death. And so their friendship grew.

A year or two later, Nadia got to join Bruce on a trip to Israel and Palestine and saw his passion for faith, for community building, for patience with everyone, including herself on a 2-week bus trip through the Holy Land. And especially for his care of seeking a better world for all and inviting others to seek that with him.

Nadia loved and admired Bruce. And that is why it came as a huge shock when on vacation at a resort in Mexico a friend sent her a message saying,

“I want to make sure you’ve heard about what happened to Bruce.”

Nadia went scrambling to see what happened online. Finally, through a mutual friend she learned that two nights earlier Bruce had gotten behind the wheel of a car with a higher than legal blood alcohol content. And while driving, he lost control of the vehicle and hit and killed a fifty-two-year-old mother of three. Bruce was now sitting alone, in a jail cell, knowing he had just killed someone.

Nadia had no idea how to respond, or what to say. To Bruce. To those who knew him. To her own church members who would probably soon hear this story themselves. She loved Bruce and cared so much for him. But she also kept thinking about the three children and a husband who in an instant lost their beloved mother and wife.

As she was flooded with thoughts and emotions and questions and her stomach churning, she also had to preach that Sunday. And it just so happened to be the same lectionary reading from scripture we have this Sunday – the story of the risen Jesus meeting the disciples at the beach and talking to Peter one last time.

As she read that story, she kept praying over and over the ancient prayer:

“Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.”

she wondered what could mercy mean right now. And then she looked again at this story of Peter at the beach with Jesus.

She writes, “Peter surely understood this need for mercy if anyone did...When the hour of Jesus’ betrayal and death came, Peter did not bravely stay by Jesus’ side. He chose instead to warm

himself by a nearby charcoal fire. He loved Jesus, yet in Jesus' hour of need, he denied he even knew Jesus [and he did it three times, saying again and again, "I do not know the man."].

As Nadia read, she started to see the story of Peter was the story of Bruce. Both loved God and loved Christ and loved others greatly. And both knew moments they would for the rest of their lives wish they could take back, "filled with regret and remorse and self-loathing."

Yet when Christ rises from the tomb and meets Peter at this lovely beach after a night of fishing, Jesus doesn't rebuke Peter. He doesn't say, "You had your chance Peter and you failed. I'm done with you now."

Instead, on that beach shore, Jesus welcomes Peter once again to his table of grace. He feeds him a delicious meal of bread and fish. They probably embrace and tell stories and weep with joy. And then Jesus gives Peter three chances to proclaim his love. The same amount of times Peter denied him, Jesus invites him to change that denial to faith and love. On that wind swept beach, Jesus tells Peter, "I'm not done with you. I love you still. And my love is going to live and shine through you, no matter how big your remorse, regret, or mistakes have been."

Nadia Bolz Weber writes,

"God is a God of Easter...God's mercy is the kind that killed the thing that wronged it and resurrects something new in its place... We may wish to rewrite our past, but what's done cannot, will not, be undone. But I am here to say that in the mercy of God it can be redeemed, and that God redeems even the biggest messes we make – mine, Peter's Bruce's."

As Nadia finished reading the story of Jesus and Peter meeting again, she saw Jesus now, sitting with Bruce. Jesus, breaking through whatever jail cell or locked door there was, and sitting with him, handing him a Clif bar, and three times, asking, Bruce, do you love me?"

A pastor friend of mine once told me that one mistake he often makes is to use too much nuance, to not just say directly the main thing.

So, this morning I don't have a lot to add to Nadia's story and faith and reflection, except this. Christ's grace is for you. Christ's love is for you. Christ's resurrection is to here to redeem you and all of us. Whatever mistakes you have made. Whatever regret or pain you may carry. Whatever past you wish you could change, Christ welcomes you here. And Christ's love is never going to leave your side.

We are a church of imperfect sinners, with messy lives. And this table, this worship, this community, is here for you through it all. Because Christ's love and hope never stops. Amen.