

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

APRIL 10, 2016

John 21:1-19

"Payback Time"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

It was during Lent, and some church members were rehearsing the Passion Play they were going to present on Good Friday.

A tall, burly construction worker had the part of Jesus, and he was dragging a heavy cross along while on either side, the people in the crowd were jeering and mocking him – shouting insults. Then, one of the crowd characters, getting carried away in his role, spit and caught Jesus right in the face.

The Jesus figure had had enough, and, forgetting that this was all a drama, stopped, looked him in the eye and said, ***"Just wait. I'll be back to take care of you after Easter."***

It's a very common theme in the movies, isn't it? A bunch of bullies picks on the hero, until finally he's had enough. And we in the audience find that we just can't wait until it's "payback time."

Revenge. It's a common desire in all human beings.

Peter was a disciple who loved Jesus. In fact, at the Last Supper, Peter declares that he will follow Jesus even to death. And in the garden, when the soldiers and temple police come to arrest Jesus, Peter draws a sword and cuts off the ear of one of them.

But while Jesus was being questioned inside by the high priests, some of the soldiers and others warming themselves around a charcoal fire accused Peter of being one of Jesus' disciples, and Peter vehemently denied it.

When push came to shove, Peter wasn't able to keep his promise. He turned his back on Jesus. Three times Peter denied that he even knew Jesus.

If Jesus were an action-movie hero, we can almost imagine him saying to Peter, as he was being led off to crucifixion: *"Just wait. I'll be back to take care of you after Easter."*

In our Gospel this morning, it's several days after Jesus' death. Although the disciples had seen the risen Christ on Easter evening, they're still trying to process all of it – to figure out just what it means for them.

Peter wants to go back to the familiar, so he tells his friends, *"I'm going fishing."*

They fish all night long and catch nothing. In the early morning, they see a stranger on the shore. It's Jesus, but they don't recognize him.

In the old way of doing things, the cycle of revenge and payback is strong.

And so we could expect that when Jesus, the hero of the story, next encounters Peter, it'll be payback time. We might expect him to *"take care of Peter"* by saying, *"Peter, you turned your back on me in my darkest hour. Now, guess what, I'm going to turn my back on you! Get out of my sight!"*

But friends, **Jesus is not a Hollywood action-hero.** He doesn't act the way we might expect. **Easter is not about revenge. It's not about payback.**

In Easter, the risen Christ brings, instead, reconciliation.

Of course, our first big clue was when Jesus prayed from the cross for the crowds who had put him there. A Hollywood action-hero would have prayed, *"God, just please help me come back and take care of them after Easter."*

But you remember what he prayed instead: *"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."*

There are still people today who think of God mainly as a stern judge; a God who is watching us closely so that he can **clobber us as soon as we screw up. But God is not about condemnation.**

Most of us have memorized John 3:16 *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."* God wants to give eternal life, not death.

But **John 3:17 is equally important:** *"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* God didn't send his son for payback.

Or, as Paul says in Romans, *"...while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son..."*

EASTER IS ABOUT RECONCILIATION. It's about **new life; new beginnings; a whole new world.**

But Peter didn't know that. Peter remembered that he had denied his Lord not once, but three times. I wonder what he felt when he jumped into the water. Was he **hoping Jesus had forgotten?**

It was **hard for him to look Jesus in the eye when he encountered him on the beach.** I wonder if the smell of the charcoal fire reminded him of that other charcoal fire where he had vehemently denied that he even knew Jesus. He probably **wondered if it was going to be "payback time."**

Here's the place in the action movie where the hero is going to *"take care of Peter,"* to use the words of our "Passion Play Jesus" from the story I told at the beginning.

And actually, that construction worker had it partly right, even if he didn't understand what he was saying.

Because Jesus did, indeed, come back after Easter to **“take care of” Peter and the other disciples who had deserted him.**

In fact, **Jesus came back after Easter to TAKE CARE OF THE WHOLE WORLD.** But it's not what we'd expect.

Peter has failed miserably to keep his brave promise to follow Jesus even unto death. And he wouldn't be surprised if Jesus told him, *"Sorry Peter, I guess you're just not up to the job of being one of my disciples."*

But Jesus has returned to **"TAKE CARE OF PETER"** IN QUITE A DIFFERENT WAY: **as only Jesus can do.**

Jesus has come back so that he can **restore Peter: pick him up, dust him off and put him back on the pathway** of following Jesus.

Now, it's true, part of that process included Peter coming face to face with his inability to follow Jesus on his own. That's why Jesus asked him three times, *"do you love me?"*

And each time, after Peter says, *"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,"* Jesus says to him, *"Feed my lambs... tend my sheep."*

Peter thought he could best show his love for Jesus by making grandiose promises to follow him even to the cross or by using a sword. Well, we can see how that ended up!

But instead Jesus gives him such a simple-sounding mission: *"Feed my sheep."* In other words, *"strengthen and serve all those who belong to me."*

And that shows us just how it is that **Jesus intends to "take care of us after Easter."**

Jesus has returned to bring reconciliation to Peter. He's come back so he can lead Peter into the new world which he opened up on Easter Sunday.

And Jesus has come back after Easter to **lead you and me into that same world.**

It's an Easter world.

It's a new world where we can begin each day with a blank slate because our sins have been forgiven.

It's a world where we know that **we are loved and watched over by Jesus, the good shepherd.**

And it's a world where Jesus uses other Christians to feed us: to take care of us. **How about that?**

But – and **this is very important** – it's also a world where we, like Peter, are GIVEN AN IMPORTANT MISSION. **Like Peter, we who love Jesus are told to feed his sheep.**

You and I, **sinner**s basking in the wonderful sunlight of the Easter world, are called to **care for others**.

You and I, folks who have denied Jesus and turned our backs on him **way more than three times** certainly deserve some sort of **payback**.

But we **don't get what we deserve**. Instead, we're called and invited to the exciting ministry of feeding the sheep of our master, Jesus Christ.

And the amazing, wonderful truth is that, at the same time as we serve and help others, our Christian brothers and sisters will be **helping and serving us!**

All because JESUS HAS COME BACK AFTER EASTER TO "TAKE CARE OF" ALL OF US.

RESURRECTION BRINGS RECONCILIATION.

When Jesus asks us this morning: "*Do you love me?*" we can answer, "*Yes, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I love you.*"

Reconciled by the power of Easter, we can, indeed, **love Jesus, and feed his sheep**.

And we can **share that reconciliation with others**.

Because at Easter, JESUS CAME BACK TO TAKE CARE OF THE WHOLE WORLD. Alleluia! Amen.