

John 21.19-24  
Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist  
27 December 2020  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Gloria in excelsis deo +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In almost whipsaw fashion this Sunday takes us from the birth of our Lord to those days just after His resurrection.

You know all about this moment—how the disciples were at the Sea of Tiberias. Fishing through the night, with no success. And how, as they pulled ashore there was a Man standing there. Probably just an outline in the dawn light. And He had told them to cast their nets into the sea and they were filled with a catch greater than they could even pull into the boat. After no fish all night long!

Immediately John—the disciple whom Jesus loved—recognized that it was Jesus and blurted out, “It is the Lord!” Several minutes later when they came ashore Jesus was standing over a fire and already cooking fish. And they all settled down to breakfast.

It's during that breakfast that Jesus began a conversation with Peter. The famous one, when He asked Peter three times, “Do you love Me?” The first two times He used one word for love. When Peter responded Yes, He told him simply, “Feed My Sheep.”

The last time Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love Me?” He used a different word. For Jesus did not just ask, “Do you love Me?” but, “Am I your φίλος? Is that how you see Me, Peter, as your φίλος?”

Peter knew exactly what His Lord meant. All he had to do was recall Jesus' words from a few nights before, the first Maundy Thursday: “No one has greater love than this, that he lay down his life for his φίλοι.” That's exactly what Jesus was asking: Peter, do you love Me like a φίλος? Would you lay down your life for Me?

In answering Yes, Peter went from leading a quiet life as a country parson to being the victim of a violent death. “Amen, amen, I tell you,” Jesus said, “when you were young, you put on your own belt and walked about where you wanted; but when you grow old you shall stretch out your hands and another will bind you and will carry you where you do not want.” Jesus said this to show what kind of death Peter was going to do die and so glorify God. And having said this, Jesus said, “Follow Me.”

But before you get weepy for St. Peter, recognize what the Lord had granted him: He had promised Peter that no matter what would befall him, even death itself, Jesus would remain his God and Lord, who would rescue him from that death. Even more, He had promised that Peter's life would achieve the highest honor of being lost in martyrdom for the sake of Christ—he who loses his life for Christ's sake gains it. That His death itself would be a cruciform preaching of the Gospel by which Peter had been saved—his death an imitation of his Redeemer's offering up His life, a fragrant offering.

In sum, you might regard martyrdom as a curse; but how could you be so foolish? A life lived apart from Christ for the sake of ease is a million times worse than a life of suffering lived in Christ. Dying for the faith is a million times better than dying outside of the faith. Death isn't the worst thing that can happen to you—hell is. And that's just what the Lord had bestowed upon Peter: the honor of a holy death in

faith in Christ; the honor of a blessed death for confessing Christ. Beloved in the Lord—that's exactly how *you* want to die. It's also how John wanted to die.

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Well, it's just at that point that the Gospel we just heard begins. Jesus had said, "Follow Me," so that's just what Peter did. John was lagging behind just a few paces. But Peter could hardly believe what he had heard. John, who had stood by Jesus's cross as He hung dying, John, who had outstripped Peter to the empty tomb in his zeal to see his risen Lord. John, this disciple whom Jesus loved—how could it be that Peter, who had betrayed the Lord, whose hesitation about what he'd actually see when got to Jesus' grave led to his laggard pace—did the women have it right? How could Jesus have risen? He was just as dead as a doornail?—whose relationship with Jesus was always just one step below John's relationship with Jesus—how could Jesus have honored PETER with such a death, and not John? "THIS GUY, Lord—" Peter said, "what about him? How could You possibly honor me like this and dishonor John? How could You give me certainty about the course of my life, even my death, and not him? How in the world is it fair that I get to walk, sure, by faith, but by sight, too, but John, he has to walk only by faith? Won't You do something for him, Lord?"

That was Jesus' gift to Peter. He'd know it when he saw it that Jesus was his God. He'd know when they'd lay him flat on those two boards in an X and tie his waist around the crossing pieces and his hands to the arms and his feet to the legs of it, and when they'd turn him upside down and plant him in the ground and leave him to suffocate like—Peter would know even then and especially then that Jesus was his God. That since Peter's suffering and crucifixion were like His, that just as He rose from the dead so would Peter. And that when Peter would die he would actually live—with Him who is the resurrection and the life. That's what Jesus was going for Peter. But not for John?

And so Peter, well, Peter, he earns his last rebuke from the Lord: "If I wish John to remain until I come, what slight is that to you? You! You follow Me."

This is where all sorts of silliness starts. Indiana Jones' John off in some cave, 2,000 years old, guarding the Holy Grail, and all that sort of thing.

But Jesus did not say, "He doesn't die," but "If I wish him to remain until I come, what slight is that to you, Peter?" Beloved in the Lord, don't spend your last \$100,000 looking for an aged John in a cave in Palestine. You won't find him.

For John, too, has died. But in a way an even more glorious death than Peter's. A kind of Thomas-in-the-Upper-Room death—Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. John didn't get a roadmap for his life (neither do you). John didn't get a prophecy about his death (neither do you). John didn't get Jesus whispering in his ear what *kind* of death he'd die (neither do you). Nor did John get a death that in its detail conformed to anything Jesus had ever said (neither do you).

But that doesn't mean he didn't have anything. Or that you don't.

In fact, in what counted he had everything Peter had. He had a Lord who stood before him victorious over sin and death. You have that same Lord. He had a Lord whose promise applied to him every bit as much as it applied to Peter: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." So do you. He had a Lord who made him his own in his Baptism, who comforted him with His Holy Supper, whose words were life and salvation.

With his very own eyes he had seen, with his very own hands he had handled, this Word of Life—this Jesus. So had Peter. And just like Peter he was to be a witness—a testifier to and proclaimer and preacher of these things.

A testifier. A proclaimer. A preacher. For preachers bring the Word of Christ. The Word of Christ brings about hearing. Hearing brings about faith. Faith brings about the cry of faith. And all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

That's what John had. Like Peter he was a witness to all these things—to Christ's Baptism by John. To Christ's miracles and signs. To Christ's teaching. To Christ's righteous life. To Christ's holy suffering. To Christ's innocent death for sinners at the hands of sinners. To Christ's glorious resurrection from the grave.

But what was witnessed makes not a pinch of difference if it's not committed to words. If it's not proclaimed. If not's written: "This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things."

It's the words that matter. For Christ has committed Himself above all to words. But what words those are. They not only tell of Christ, they give Christ. They not only tell of how the ruptured relationship between God and His creatures has been repaired, they repair it when they are heard. They not only talk of Jesus forgiving sins—they forgive sins.

For the resurrected Lord who stood before Peter and John that day—the resurrected Lord who today envelopes Himself within His Word—is the same Lord who at His suffering and death for the sins of the world said, "It is finished." Sins? Gone. Death? Dead. Satan? Defeated. Hell? Closed, and the way to heaven opened.

You may have very few certainties in life. But the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things? *We know* that his testimony is true.

Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

jsb  
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