

# EASTER IN ORDINARY

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., the third Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2010 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on the Gospel according to John, 21: 1 – 19.

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I was raised — “reared” as they say in Texas — in the open spaces of the American southwest. My childhood involved *Garcia Mitchell 300* spinning reels and .30-06 rifles and 12 gauge shotguns and birdshot and buckshot. I come from a family of outdoorsmen. My parents were with us this winter. When I told my dad I was thinking of getting Aaron a high-powered pellet gun, he asked, “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I said, “He’s 14. When I was 11 you gave me a .410 shotgun and a .22!” “You know, you’re right! I did!” he said.

When I was ten, my father bought a fourteen-foot fiberglass boat and he took me and my four-year old brother Sean on a fishing expedition to Elephant Butte Lake fifty miles north of where we lived in New Mexico. That lake, formed by a dam created on the Rio Grande River in 1916, is up to 165 feet deep and 40 miles long. At the boat landing my dad backed the trailer into the water to put the boat in, snapped a life jacket onto Sean sitting him down in the boat, and asked me to stand on the marina and to hold the line while he parked the truck. The lake was calm but “Hold on tight, chum,” he said. “Don’t let go. I’ll be right back.” You know where this is going.

When he got back we weren’t there. A wind kicked up pushing the boat away from the marina. I lowered my rear end and pulled as hard as I could to keep the boat from getting away. The only way I could hold on to the line and not fall into the water was to jump onto the pulpit of the boat. A pulpit is a piece of furniture in the nave of a church but a pulpit is also the enclosed platform at the extreme bow end of a ship. I know what you’re thinking: whether I end up in a pulpit of one sort or another, it’s the result of a mishap either way.

When he got back, Sean and I were so far out on the lake that I could barely see my dad on the shore frantically looking for us up and down the marina. Another man launching his boat got dad’s attention and pointed in our direction, and seeing us now my dad put his hands to his mouth to yell something that I was too far away to hear. What my brother was thinking whilst this was going on I can’t say. At four he was young enough to be unaware and unafraid. But I was aware. I was afraid. I was afraid right up to the moment when I saw that my father knew where we were and was coming to

get us.

One more fishing story. It’s good to put these in the public record so that when my sons compose their memoirs they will not have to write, “I come from a family of *indoorsmen*.” We went with some friends up into the mountains of the Apache National Forest in Arizona to fish Big Lake for trout. Setting out early one morning we got to our spot and opened our tackle boxes to set up our lines, the idea being that we’d use different lures and learn what the fish hit. My dad suggested I try a silver spoon, but young and foolish I chose a red and white one instead. Mr. Kita, who’d be fishing on my left, saw that and put on a silver spoon. We threw our first casts and Mr. Kita’s pole bent sideways. I’ll come back to him later.

On the first Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the tomb and found it empty, according to the gospels of Mark and Matthew the angel of the Lord appeared to them and told them that Jesus wasn’t there, that he had risen. The angel told them to tell his disciples that Jesus was going before them to Galilee and that there they would see him. The women tell the disciples but the men are incredulous. Who could believe such a story? And thus because of disbelief what we have in the twentieth chapter of John’s gospel is the risen Lord changing his schedule and making two detour appearances right there in Jerusalem.

So we read how on the evening of the first day of the week when the disciples were together in the upper room with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came among them saying, “Peace be with you!” and showing them his hands and his side. It’s his first resurrection appearance to the apostles. But Thomas wasn’t there, so Jesus comes back on the next Sunday on his second detour, going again out of his way this time for someone who hadn’t been there. The doors are locked again, and appearing to them, Jesus says to Thomas, “Put your fingers here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe.” And Thomas responds, “My Lord and my God!” The apostles are all there. They believe. And chapter twenty ends with, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son

of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

A number of scholars believe that that is the real ending of John's gospel. It wraps things up so neatly that they think the twenty-first chapter is an appendix added later by a skilled editor. I disagree. I believe the same John who wrote the prologue to his gospel wrote the epilogue to his gospel. It's here that John gives us a picture of what "life in his name" is like. The evangelist Luke does the same thing except that Luke's epilogue is a 'book' we call the *Acts of the Apostles*. In this epilogue, John shows us what we might call 'Easter in ordinary'. This is the meeting the Lord anticipated when he told the women to tell his disciples they would see him in Galilee. Here we lean with John into the new creation the Most High has made in raising Jesus from the dead. At the edge of it as at a beachhead John peels back the scrim on the new world and the striking thing is how ordinary Jesus is, if I may put it that way, what correspondence there is between the risen Lord eating breakfast by the fire and the real presence of the Jesus we experience and follow.

Relative to earlier scenes on the Sea of Galilee and to the previous resurrection appearances, what happens here is restrained, understated. Jesus stands on the shore shouting. He doesn't stand on the water or hover in the air as might be expected of a risen Messiah. He asks a question, "Catch any fish?" This is not the sovereign voice that commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb. It is prosaic and like "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you'll find some!" the kind of thing my little brother said to me fishing on Elephant Butte Lake. The risen Christ doesn't turn some water into fish. He doesn't command 153 trout to jump into the boat. It's not the wind and the waves now that he commands. It's *them*; his disciples.

This is new yet to us familiar. This is life as we know it, Jesus at hand in the ordinary. The subtlety is Proustian. When the disciples come ashore they see a fire with fish on it. Jesus *already had* his fish; they need *him*, not the other way around. Jesus doesn't multiply his breakfast the way he'd multiplied a boy's lunch to feed a crowd. "Bring some of the fish you've just caught," he says, and, "Come and have breakfast." It is ordinary and it is wonderful, more wonderful in its way than Jesus going through locked doors to see them.

It's Easter in ordinary. People like my wife and children put Bible verses up on their refrigerators. Here's one for your refrigerator. "Come and have breakfast." I'm serious. Do you realize what that means in your ordinary life? *You don't have to ever again eat breakfast alone.*

The subtlety continues in the conversation Jesus has with Peter, asking him three times, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" ringing bells in his mind of the three times Peter denied knowing him when Jesus had been arrested. He does

it for Peter's sake. Outside the house of Annas the high priest and Caiphas, Peter blatantly denied loving Jesus. "You are not one of his disciples are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. "I am not." A second time, after Jesus is interrogated, the question is asked again. "No." And the third time he is asked, Peter cursed and swore to them, "I do not know the man you're talking about!"

This can't be swept under the rug. Peter had denied knowing Jesus while warming himself beside a 'charcoal fire' (cf. John 18: 18, *anthrakia*). When he professes his love for Christ here it is again by a charcoal fire (*anthrakia*) which Jesus provided for them. We are meant to notice this. John's gospel is sparse in particulars, so when he provides this kind of detail he is taking us by the elbow and saying, Look!

**A** *nthrakia* is an echo. It echoes Peter's denial and it echoes the *Sanctus* that we sing every Sunday in our worship, something from the experience of the prophet Isaiah. You remember that after his vision of the enthroned Lord in the Temple, Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." Do you remember what Isaiah then saw? He saw a seraphim place in his mouth, in Isaiah's own mouth, a burning coal (*anthraka*) taken from the altar with the words, "Behold this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sins forgiven" (Isa. 6: 1 – 7).

Some of the disciples overheard Peter's betrayal. We know John did. And certainly by now Peter knew that Jesus forgave him. But the question for Peter was, Would Jesus *use* him? Would Jesus trust him with any responsibility? He had been put back on the team. But would Jesus put him back on the field? And that question is answered in spades. Feed my sheep. Tend them. Feed them. Be ready to die for them. Follow me. To see how Jesus used him, read Luke's epilogue.

Luke and John have their epilogues so here is mine. I said I'd tell you more about Mr. Kita. He was a native Japanese who'd been trained as a *kamikaze* pilot during World War II. Fortunately, the war ended "before he was strapped in" to put it as my father does. Who had won the victory in that war was not lost on Mr. Kita, any more than it was lost on Peter and the apostles who it was who'd been crucified and risen victorious from the dead. Years later Peter was crucified as a rock-solid witness to Jesus. He loved his Lord and lived and died for the sake of the one who'd loved him to the very end. As for Mr. Kita, he came to America and enlisted in the United States Army. What had bent his pole sideways, attracted by his silver spoon? A trophy cutthroat trout. He took that beautiful fish to the taxidermist and had it mounted. My dad says he retired in *Las Cruces* which in English means the crosses. Amen.