

In our Gospel today we see the fourth and final time that Jesus appears after his resurrection. The disciples and Jesus get to eat breakfast together and Peter is forgiven after having denied being friends with Jesus before his crucifixion.

The first time he appeared was to Mary while she was weeping at the tomb. The second time, it was behind closed doors at the house where the disciples were hiding. He breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit and commissioned them to continue his work. The third time he appeared when Thomas was there and Thomas believed after seeing Jesus' wounds.

Before Jesus' appearance to Mary, she is weeping and grieving. In addition to being a healer, grief it seems is an emotion that can give us insight. There is something holy about grief. It is a process that allows us to move forward, to transform, and I believe, if we are receptive, gives way to revelation. Grief might be something that allows us to begin to recognize the divine.

In all of these appearances, the disciples and Mary were grieving. Grieving that their teacher was gone. The resurrection makes me think about what heaven and eternity might be like. Especially when Jesus appears to Mary. When he first appears, Mary doesn't recognize him. She's alone. But she looks into the tomb and sees two angels sitting where Jesus was laid. Then after they ask her why she's crying, and she answers them, she turns and sees who she thinks is the gardener. I think Mary in the midst of this, is getting a glimpse into paradise. This is a reminder of the Garden of Eden. God was the gardener after creation. God created the garden, and put Adam and Eve in it. "And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze." (Genesis 3:8)

When the gardener, Jesus, spoke Mary's name, she suddenly recognized him. And Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (John 20:17) Jesus is in the process of ascending, evolving into his heavenly body. Mary is experiencing a heavenly scene in the moment. This experience began in grief.

In our gospel today, the disciples and Jesus are on the beach having breakfast. This too make me think of paradise. The disciples are eating breakfast after a dark long night, with the son of God, who is on his way to heaven to join the father. Breakfast is my favorite meal. Waking up, feeling strong, but half asleep, a new day ahead sometimes feels like heaven to me. Drinking a cup of coffee, eggs and bacon and potatoes and toast, in this case, on a beach, fish on a charcoal fire even better, on the shore of a lake with the son of God even better.

Reflecting on these passages gives me an opportunity to think about what life after death might be like. To imagine. A garden like place, or a place near water. A place where we go to see the loved ones who have gone before us and to see also those we have not yet known or met, who we will love in the time to come. Where our bodies will be free of disease, and yet the scars that we had in this life will be visible, with the memory of the pain associated with them but without the pain. A place where our bodies will be both, our younger and older selves all at once. And if we see someone who died too young, we will see them both in their youth and in their unfulfilled maturity. And if some of us never found the work we were meant to do on earth, or found fulfillment in love while we were here, we find it in eternity.

In all of these appearances, Mary and the disciples didn't recognize that it was Jesus who was in their midst. How often have I failed to recognize God's presence, God's goodness in my life? Instead of focusing on the darkness, where is the goodness in our lives? I can ask myself these questions each day. Where did I see God? Where is God working in my life?

Sometimes it's not that we're failing as people when we don't see Jesus don't see God's presence in our lives, but it is that we are simply in process of understanding. We sometimes need time in order to recognize God's presence. It's like love. Sometimes we need time in order to recognize that someone loves us, or sometimes we need to give people time to recognize that we love them. Sometimes I can see God's presence on my own, and sometimes I need it to be shown to me by someone else. Mary was alone when she was able to see. The disciples when they were in the boat didn't see that it was Jesus at first, he was just a man on the beach giving them advice about to how to fish. But the beloved disciple recognized him, and then after that, the rest of the disciples' saw him. Their recognition happened in community.

It seems like most of the book of John is about life and eternal life. Nicodemus is born again, re-born spiritually after his encounter with Jesus. Lazarus is raised from the dead. The Gospel of John is permeated with the idea that eternal life is not just related to the future, but is also present in the here and now. Mary and the disciples were experiencing something of paradise when they saw Jesus after he rose from the dead.

Within our Gospel passage today too is the command to love. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. He is giving Peter a chance to erase the three times that he denied knowing Jesus before he was crucified. When Peter says, yes,. And Jesus answers with, "Feed my lambs," "Tend my sheep," and "Feed my sheep," he is both commanding him to "love your God with all your heart and mind and soul," and he is also giving back Peter the purpose of his life. His reason for living. When Peter denied Jesus, he was more importantly denying himself, who he was and who was to be. When Jesus was asking Peter if he loved him, he was asking him if he loved himself.

One of the great definitions of love comes from First Corinthians. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, and more. It's nice, it's gentle. It's the sweet side of love. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). This definition is true, but it's not enough. It doesn't describe in full the cost of love.

When Jesus is asking Peter if he loves him, he is deadly serious. To emphasize this he asks him three times. To love God for Peter, was to do what he was created for and that was to feed God's sheep, be a disciple, and spread the Gospel. What this love means is that Peter will end up some day being crucified like Jesus was. He will give up his life to save it.

It's the same in our other reading from the New Testament. In it Jesus strikes Saul down in a bolt of light and blinds him and commissions him for real work, gives him a purpose. Saul, soon to become Paul was driving his life fully in the wrong direction. Jesus loved Saul despite Saul's hatred for Jesus and his persecution of new Christians. Jesus loved Saul and extended his grace to him.

What does it mean to love like this, for us, for me? It means to be in actual relationships. Not living on the surface of things. Being real. It means revealing and accepting my past, which may be full of mistakes like Peter had, or Paul, or David, or Moses. It means sharing and revealing what my needs are, sharing my weaknesses as well as my strengths. It means taking the risk that I might be rejected. It means telling people how I feel, even if they might not feel the same. Love is painful. Love is scary. It can make you feel like you're crazy. Love means using my intuition even if I feel like I don't have any, and cutting through the verbiage, the noise that people often make in order to hide themselves, and it means looking and trying to see who people really are beneath the surface. Jesus did that with Peter and Paul. Love sometimes is not easy. It takes strength to love. But, love is the only thing that matters. People can be difficult, but people are all we have.

To love means to obey Jesus' great commandment: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength," and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Mark 12:30-31). To love myself, I have to love God and my neighbor. But I don't have to love alone. I can pray, I can ask for help both from God and those around me. And if we love, if we pay attention to God's presence among us, sometimes we get to see a glimpse of paradise.

Amen.

Lectionary Third Sunday of Easter,  
Acts 9:1-6, (7-20), Revelation 5:11-14, John 21:1-19, Psalm 30

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