

Year C Easter 3 John 21 1 to 19

Last week, in the story of Jesus twice appearing to his disciples in the upper room, we kept hearing the word “believe”: Thomas, do you believe...Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe...These things are written so that you may come to believe...

The word that we hear translated as “believe” is the Greek word *pist*. This word encompasses more than our English word does. Believe means more than accepting something as true. The word *pist* embraces, also, the feelings of faith and trust – it involves knowing with your heart as well as with your head. And this necessitates being in relationship. Not just knowing about someone...it means knowing someone intimately enough to have faith and trust in who they are and what they do.

This is the belief that we are asked to have in Jesus Christ. A belief that comes of being in an intimate relationship with him as the Messiah. John tells us today that this belief is grounded in intense, powerful love. Love that mends broken sinfulness. Love that mobilizes us to share this love with the world. A love so powerful that it brings us to walk where we don't want to walk – into a life where our life is on the line.

John tells us that this life of love, empowered by the passionate belief that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world, the One who will reconcile all things to God, this life is not just for Peter. This life is for the church.

For many people – probably most people actually, if you were to say the word “church” to them, they would picture in their minds, a building that looks very much like the one we're in right now. But we know – although we may need to

consciously prod ourselves to think this way – we know that the church is not really the building. The church is the people, the followers of Christ. The word “church” comes from the Greek word *ecclesia* which means gathering or assembly. Not the gathering place...not the building in which we gather...*just* the gathering – the people. So, when I say John is showing us today that this life of intense love, flowing from our intimate relationship with Christ, this life is for the church, I mean that this life is for you...each one of you because, when we gather, we become the church.

John is writing to instruct the young church in the way of Christian life. We, as modern readers and hearers of John, sometimes need a little help in seeing this because most of us do not experience the same in-depth study and teaching of Scripture and of Jesus’ teachings that John’s original audience would have experienced. This story that John tells us today, like many stories in the Gospels, reflects the life and worship of the church – not because John and the other gospel writers deliberately put elements of church life and worship into their stories but, rather, because church life and worship organically grew out of the life with God and worship of God that Jesus showed to us in his life as God with us.

Today John places Peter before us – the one on whom Jesus tells us elsewhere that he will build his church, the one who starts the gathering. We witness Peter as he joyfully encounters the risen Lord, plunges into the sea to swim to him, shares a meal with him and others, and then is questioned about his love and instructed and sent out to care for others. It is like the “being the church blueprint”: the seeker finds Jesus and believes he is the Lord. Wanting to be in

relationship with him, the seeker plunges into the waters of baptism (the word “baptism” actually means “to plunge”). The baptism is followed by the shared meal with other believers in the presence of Christ and during which Christ is recognized and known. The person is instructed in the ways of Christ – most especially in the love of Christ – and then is sent into the world to share this love, to care for others, to tend to the needs of others.

We experience these elements each time we gather, encountering the risen Lord in word and meal, recalling our baptism, learning of his ways, sharing his love with each other – the peace of Christ – and then we are sent into the world to share this love.

John shows us amazing details of what this life together as the church will look and feel like. Jesus calls his disciples, “Children.” It is a term of endearment like sweetheart. We are precious to him, in a close trusting relationship with him. We live as God’s children – his little ones. And this life with him is a life of abundance – he fills our needs. The fishermen caught all of the fish they needed and then some. On our own we can do nothing, often failing miserably, feeling incomplete but, with God, all things are possible. After doing things on their own and achieving nothing, Jesus calls to his children, invites them to try again *with* him, and – crucially – they hear and respond. They act according to his instructions with his help and the results are astounding. This is a powerful image for us and for every gathering of Christ’s body who measures themselves according to the world’s standards and finds nothing but the despair of an empty net. We are too light on bodies and too heavy on age. We are too small on income and too big on bills to pay. God calls to us, his children, invites us to act according to his will, and

the results will be astounding. We will have the abundance of the life in God's kingdom.

This abundant life we are given is not for us to keep to ourselves, to hide it away like a priceless jewel in a safety deposit box, never seeing the light of day, never enjoyed in case it is lost or stolen. Our life in Christ is meant to be a life that continuously invites others to join in until all people have the gift that we have. The 153 fish in the net is meant to signify all of the different, known, types of fish at that time. And, of course, these ancient fishermen were told by Jesus that they were to fish for people – all of the different, known, people then and now. The net will not break. God's love – which is the love that we share – is big enough to hold everyone. We learned an important lesson about this the night we saw Jesus on his knees, washing the feet of Judas – the one he knew was about to betray him. We welcome, we serve, we remove the barriers to God's table. God does the judging.

Thankfully, God is forgiving. Jesus, Peter, and the other disciples sit around a charcoal fire – a charcoal fire reminiscent of the one by which Peter warmed his hands as he denied Jesus three times...denied being a follower, denied being a believer, denied even knowing him. By this charcoal fire, Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves him. Jesus forgives. Jesus wipes the slate clean. Jesus gives him new life.

We all, like Peter, have denied Christ many times over throughout our lives. This denial takes countless different forms...allowing obligations to push God aside, letting the world tell us what we desire in order to have the perfect life, remaining a silent onlooker to oppression and injustice, speaking up with words, thoughts or

deeds that pull down and tear apart rather than build up and reconcile, the list goes on.

As many times as we deny Christ, he comes back to us with an invitation to love him. As Peter says, so, too, do we: You know me inside and out and you know that I love you. God does know us and loves us anyway. God knows we profess to love him but also knows this love can go astray. John later explains why some authorities believed in Jesus but did not confess him publicly. John writes, “for they loved (and the Greek word is *agapē*), they loved human glory rather than the glory that comes from God” (12:42-43). “This *agapē* is deep and heartfelt. It involves them to the core of their being, and it is entirely misdirected, the “right” love for the wrong things. Just as *agapē* can be a love that comes from God and leads to life, it can also become desperately distorted, directed toward things that turn us away from God” (Frank L. Crouch, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). And so, Jesus keeps asking us if we love him, keeping this love turned to God. “Follow me,” Jesus commands us in this passage. I know you, I love you and I want you to follow me, follow my way of love rather than the world’s.

Follow me. This love is a love of action. Love is as love does. Interestingly, although it sounds like Jesus is repeating himself – do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? He is using different Greek words. There are three words for love in Greek while we have just one. Eros, philos, and agape. It is love of self, a love of others, and the highest form of love, like God’s love for the world (3:16), a pure, selfless love that could only have a divine source. Jesus uses the second two – philos and agape. Love God. Love others. That, hopefully, reminds you of the two great commandments. Jesus, here, equates those two loves – the same

pure and passionate love we have for God is the love that we are to have for others. This love is to be love in action: Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

Frank L. Crouch, Dean and Vice President of the Moravian Theological Seminary, writes, “This is love as courage, love as risk, love as not wavering, regardless of what we are called to do. Christ calls Peter and us, as individuals and as communities of faith, to follow him even where we would not otherwise go, even where we might not want to go. The times in which we live are no time for [saying] “we have never done it that way before,” no time for returning to what we are used to. These times, more than ever, are times that call for the best love of God, friends, neighbours, and enemies that we can muster. Or, better yet, these times cry out for the love to which God calls us and that God will bring to life within us for the sake of others” (Crouch, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

Individually, we are loved although broken. Together we are the church – loving as God loves us. In this love and with this love, let us hear and respond to the risen Lord who says, “Follow me.”