

13 April 2016
Easter 3 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“Our Seeking and Restoring Saviour”
Text: John 21:15-19; Ezekiel 34:11-16

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] Alleluia.

How gently and compassionately Jesus deals with Peter. The regret, the feeling of unworthiness, the shame - all are still strong in his mind and heart from his three-fold denial not so many nights ago. How could he have caved so easily? Why could he not be more courageous? Why were his words and conviction so firm but his actions so weak? Peter probably hated himself. Sure, Jesus had come to them that Easter night and forgave them. But still, he couldn't forget.

But how gently and compassionately Jesus deals with Peter. Jesus embodies the shepherding, searching God we heard about from Ezekiel, when God said: ***I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.***

That had been a very cloudy and dark day for Peter - and the others - when the satanic wolf had scattered them from their shepherd. They were among the ***lost***, the ***strayed***, the ***injured***, and the ***weak*** that Ezekiel talked about. But Peter maybe moreso than the rest. And so Jesus gives him special attention. For the Good Shepherd who knows each of His sheep by name also cares for them individually and uniquely. He knows what each needs, and He provides.

So to Peter the thrice denier, Jesus gives him the chance to be Peter the thrice ***confessor***, though it wasn't exactly the same. This was a safe place, among friends. Jesus doesn't immediately send Peter out to fail again. Peter needed to take baby steps, to be with His Lord, be embraced by His love and forgiveness, and confess to Him first. ***Simon, son of John, do you love me?*** Yes he does.

But not only does Jesus give Peter the chance to confess his love for Jesus three times, Jesus also restores him to his office as apostle three times: ***Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep***, Jesus says. Perhaps this three-fold restoration is needed because this too will not be easy. In fact, from now on, Peter will face much ***more*** opposition than he did that night in the courtyard of the High Priest. And that's what Jesus tells him next. That ***when he is old, he is going to stretch out his hands and be carried where he does***

not want to go. Peter *would* follow Jesus, more than he then realized. His hands would be stretched out on a cross just as Jesus'. Not as punishment for what he had done, but as with Jesus' crucifixion, so too Peter's would *glorify God*. Because of the care and feeding of Jesus, Peter would go from denier to confessor to martyr. From sinner to saint.

How good for us sinners gathered here this night to hear these words! We who are not so different than Peter. To hear that Jesus searches out His sheep and cares for them. That He makes saints out of sinners in the forgiveness of sins. And that though we be lost, strayed, injured, and weak, we have a Good Shepherd who will not leave us or abandon us.

At times, though, when the clouds are thick and the darkness deep, it might seem like it - that Jesus is not here when we need Him. It might seem like it - that the sin in us and the evil in the world are winning. It may seem like it - that we've finally crossed the line, that we've become too sinful, too rebellious, wandered one too many times, and so wonder from our Peter-pits of regret and shame: *Jesus, son of Mary, do you still love me?*

And it is from the throne of His cross that Jesus says: *Yes, child, you see that I love you.* I love you and so I have taken all your sins and regrets and shame upon myself, here on the cross. I love you and so I am dying your death, here on the cross. I love you and so I am taking your hell, here on the cross. I love you, and so I will rise from the dead that you will too. That you, too, rise from the death of sin to live a new life. A new life I will provide for you and give to you. There can be no more sure sign that Jesus loves you than to see Him there, on the cross, trading His life for yours; dying that you might live.

Like with Peter, it won't be easy for you. Opposition to God and His Word is growing. Satan is not going to stop tempting and luring us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. And even our own sinful flesh will work against us and try to make Peters out of us all. But the Lord who loved you on the cross loves you still, and will not stop. As He knew exactly what Peter needed, so He knows exactly what you need as well; and when you need it. And He will provide. As Ezekiel said, He will gather you, feed you, protect you, and give you rest. And if He promised, there is nothing more sure on the face of this earth than that. He will do it.

So now He calls us to *follow Him*, our Good Shepherd. And though we may not know where He is leading, He does. And though we may not know what may happen along the way, He will be with us through it all. The good and the bad, the joyous and the sad, the challenges and the triumphs, in sickness and in health, at the beginning and to the end. Or as we sang in the Psalm, and as Jesus showed Peter that day: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.* And when this life is ended: *and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* Not because I love Jesus so much or follow so well, but because He loves, He seeks, He saves, me. Even today . . . for Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.