

Sermon – John 21:1-19
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
3 Easter – Year C
5 May 2019

“Do You Love Me?”

(Owen, Clayton, Eylanah, Mia, Cole, Henry, Hannah); Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The other day I was in Hyde Park at the seminary for a meeting of an interfaith, Jewish-Lutheran dialogue in which I participate. I must have looked a little confused as I was leaving the meeting, because a friend of mine, a rabbi who works in the city, asked me if I knew how to get back to where I had parked my car. I responded that I knew exactly where I was going. To which the rabbi replied, “That’s interesting, because people of faith hardly ever do.” While it was true that I knew how to get back to my car, and once in my car back to Oak Park, I chuckled at his insight. After all, people of faith – people who worship and follow God – never quite know where it’s going to get them. As we continue in these Great Fifty Days of Easter, we know that the resurrection of Jesus Christ opens up unpredictable paths down which our risen Lord will lead us.
2. Today is Confirmation Sunday. At our next service (later in this service), seven young people will stand before this congregation and affirm the promises made to them long ago, when they were brought to the font to be baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s been a good journey for them, I think, filled with Sunday morning classes and service projects, retreats and camps, worship reflections and last night’s witness service. And what will happen next in the lives of these faithful young disciples? Only God knows.

3. Today's readings put our confirmands – and the rest of us, for that matter – in good company. The early church that was born out of the resurrection was full of surprises. We find ourselves on a beach this morning with Peter, he who had three times denied knowing Jesus on the night of his betrayal. Yes, he was overjoyed to know Jesus lived, but surely shame lurked within Peter's heart. He had promised to follow Jesus no matter what, but when push came to shove, he wouldn't even own up to knowing him. He denied knowing Jesus and, in doing so, denied his truest identity as a follower of Jesus. I imagine he expected that Jesus would eventually call him to account for this sin. But there on the beach, having been fed by Jesus out of that abundant catch of fish, Jesus gives him a threefold opportunity to confess his love and claim his calling. Three times – Do you love me? In his profession of faith, Peter's world opens up anew. The risen Lord has come not to settle scores but set people free. Even Peter.

4. And Paul? This learned man named Saul was so sure of what God was up to in the world. But his limited vision, his certainty, blinded him to the new thing God was doing in Jesus Christ. Saul set out that day breathing threats and murder against the people of the Way, but God had something else in mind. A new journey from blindness to sight. And when the scales fell from his eyes, he began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.

5. Neither Peter nor Paul had the slightest notion where they were going, but when Jesus got ahold of them, their journeys took off. As people of faith, they didn't need to know where they were going. They knew that Jesus travelled with them, and that was enough. And, of course, to be a person of faith is to trust that we don't need to know where our journeys will take us because we *do* know where we will be after all the unpredictable twists and turns along the way: gathered around the throne of the Lamb of God. Because we know where we're going in the end, we don't have to know where else we're going

- along the way. We simply trust that God will lead us. We simply follow, as faithfully as we can.
6. Yesterday in this space we gathered for the funeral of Paul Bouman, a man who taught us a thing or two about loving God and faithfully following Jesus. He lived a life centered in community and hospitality, in thanks and praise, built around nothing but Jesus Christ. And in helping us learn how to sing our praises to God, Paul has made our journeys lighter. Paul reminded us that we journey not alone but together, and we sing as we travel. Earlier this morning we sang the words from our second reading, as we often do. The book of Revelation, in which God pulls back the curtain to give us a glimpse of the end of the story, is where so much of our sung liturgy comes from: “Blessing, honor, glory, and might be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen.” I quoted Kathleen Norris writing about Revelation yesterday morning at Paul’s funeral, and I like her words so much that I’ll do it again: Revelation “proclaims that when all is said and done, of the considerable noises humans are capable of, it is singing that will endure.” Wherever we go along the way, we know that we will be gathered up into Christ’s eternal Song, into God’s unending Kingdom. Knowing this, we find all the courage we need to faithfully follow Jesus into the unknown.
 7. I think our seven confirmands are going to be just fine as they go out into the world as the people God made them to be; they shared such wisdom at the Witness Service. Eylanah prayed, “Our eyes belong to you, Lord, to see your holy way. Help us to look straight ahead and see you everyday.” Reflecting on the pressures young people face, Mia reminded us, “God will love you no matter what. God appreciates the real you.” Thinking about an unknown future, Henry – who for his project made a cross necklace with a 3D printing pen – noted simply, “The cross also reminds me of God’s protection wherever I go.” In a poem, Clayton proclaimed that “H is for humble and how I will always walk humbly on the field with Jesus on my side.” Cole, reflecting on

how we don't always know what's coming and tackling the oh-so-easy topic of God's will, said, "the Will of God...means, God has a plan for all of humanity, even if it doesn't seem like it." Hannah, who made a film revolving around faith interviews with her family, grounded her witness in travelling words from the Book of Joshua: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord our God will be with you wherever you go." And Owen, thinking about the end of the Confirmation process, had this to say: "My learning doesn't end when the classes are over or when I get confirmed tomorrow morning. It's not like, 'whew, I'm a member of the church. I made it through Confirmation. I'm done.' In fact, this might just be where it starts. A new chapter of my faith and learning begins after this weekend and I am looking forward to it."

8. I am so grateful for each of these young people, for their witness and for their faith. And to them, and to all of you (and even to me), I would simply say that God loves you. You are a child of God, named and claimed by Jesus Christ. You know where you're going, so don't worry if you don't know where you're going. Like Paul, trust that God's plans for you are bigger than your own vision. Like Peter, love Jesus and feed his sheep. And don't deny who you are, a child of God. There's poignant scene in *Avengers: Endgame* in which Thor encounters a character from his past. I won't tell you who in case you're one of the few people yet to see the film, but Thor is grappling with loss and failure of cosmic proportions and can't see a way forward. He is given these words: "Everyone fails at who they're supposed to be, Thor. The measure of a person is how well they succeed at being who they are." So, friends, don't worry so much about what you think is supposed to happen, or where you'll go or what you're supposed to be. Just be who you are. Be who Jesus died for you to be. Be a child of God, and let God take it from there. Then, in the words of St. Augustine that Paul Bouman loved to quote, your life will be an "Alleluia" from head to foot. And wherever you go, an "Alleluia" is a good thing to be. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.