



Now What?

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bek
Easter 3, Year C
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Good morning and welcome on this Third Sunday of Easter. That's right, Easter isn't over. We don't celebrate for just one day, but throughout all of the Great 50 Days in the Season of Easter. The fanfare has died down now, but the memories of the stories we heard and explored together through Lent, Holy Week and Easter still linger. Most of us joined in the story at some point – by having ashes smeared on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday, by taking on a commitment during Lent, waiving our palms on Palm Sunday, having our feet washed on Maundy Thursday, or joining those who grieved on Good Friday.

Now, three weeks after Easter, things are getting back to normal in our lives and in the lives of the disciples in the story we continue to follow. Throughout the season of Easter, we replace the Old Testament reading in our Sunday liturgy with a reading from the Acts of the Apostles. This gives us the opportunity to follow the development of the church and learn about the lives of those who continued the Jesus Movement after his death and resurrection. We take this study very seriously because we are called to continue the Jesus Movement in the world today.

In this morning's sermon we'll talk about our patron saint, Paul. We'll also explore the gospel lesson and seek the answer to this important question, "What now? Now that Jesus has been crucified, died and risen, what are we, those who have vowed to continue the Jesus Movement, supposed to do next?"

This morning we hear the story of the calling of Saul who becomes Paul, our patron saint. Saul considered himself a good and pious man. He took his religion very seriously and in the name of doing what was "right", he persecuted these followers of Jesus who would one day be called Christians but who at that time were called Followers of the Way. It's hard to believe that this man who persecuted, harassed and murdered early Christians, encouraged the stoning of Stephen, and who worked so diligently to put a stop to the spread of this movement, is the person our church was named after.

What happened to turn him around? That's what we learned from this morning's lesson in Acts. Saul was both a Roman citizen and a faithful Jew. He had worked, studied and was completely committed to his faith. That's why he persecuted the followers of Jesus.

He thought he had things all figured out and though he didn't see it coming, through this amazing experience, he changed. In this lesson, we heard how Jesus broke into his life and reoriented his perspective.

If Saul could become the great Apostle to the Gentiles and the patron saint of our church here in Ventura, as well as so many other churches in the world, then anyone can change. It turns out that no one gets to determine a person's worth and identity but God. If God can use Saul as an instrument of faith, God can use any of us, too.

Let's turn to our gospel lesson. Today we meet the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, which is also known as the Sea of Galilee. They had gone out fishing but hadn't caught any fish.

A man who stood on the beach called out to them. "Cast the net to the right side of the boat and you will find some." They did as he suggested, and suddenly their net was so full they couldn't even haul it in. That's when they realized it was Jesus. It was the abundance around them that caused them to recognize that this man on the beach was actually the risen Christ.

Peter was so excited he jumped off the boat and hurried to meet the Lord. (You can always count on Peter to jump right in!) They all ended up having breakfast around the fire on the beach together.

Remembering the Last Supper and all the drama of Holy Week and Easter, we now read about the First Breakfast. This is where Jesus addresses Peter. We have come to know Peter as one who is awkward, quick to jump in, often says the wrong thing, but he loves Jesus deeply and he is utterly committed to him.

In many ways, Peter is like us. He doesn't always understand what's going on and he doesn't always do the right thing, but he tries. "I don't know if what I do pleases you Lord, but I pray that my wanting to please you, pleases you." That's Peter and I think of myself in the same way.

Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me..." Each time Peter responded, "You know that I love you Lord." By the third time, Peter is feeling hurt. Remember that it was Peter who vowed he would never deny the Lord and yet, before the cock crowed, he denied him three times. In this story he affirms his faith three times. And each time Jesus responds, "Then feed my sheep."

Peter had forsaken the Lord. He had denied him and run off. He was not present at the crucifixion. He abandoned his Lord and his God. Knowing what we know about Peter, this must have weighed heavily on him. Now Jesus gives him the opportunity to express his love and accept that he is forgiven. And what should he do because of this love, “feed my sheep.” Take care of my people.

Peter turned away from the Lord. We, too have, at times, turned away from the Lord. Peter is now forgiven, and we too are forgiven. And what should we do now that we are forgiven? We should go out into the world to love and serve the Lord, feeding his sheep, and shining as the light of Christ to a world in need.

We are to shine with the light of the resurrection. We are to confess our shortcomings and receive the forgiveness that awaits us. We are to come together around this table to receive the bread and wine made holy and then we are to go out and feed his sheep.

May we be like Peter, willing to jump in and no matter what happens, always be forgiven. May we, like Saul be so moved, so changed, that we can make a difference in the world. May our lives too be changed so that everything we do brings glory to God’s holy name and benefit to all people.

For Christ’s sake, Amen.