

**Love Alone Conquers Sin and Death**  
**based on John 21:4-19, David Jahnke, 3/27/16**

The gospel passage that we read today is all about the restoration of Peter who earlier had denied Jesus three times in Jesus' greatest time of need. So the risen Jesus takes Peter aside and gives Peter three times to re-iterate how much he loves Jesus. This balance and this reversal is just perfect...kind of like everything with Jesus, as far as I can tell.

Every one of his resurrection appearances reveals something astonishing. First, he appeared to women who were second class citizens but who had the courage to view his crucifixion and go to his tomb.

Next, the disciples are locked up in a room, still afraid for their lives after running away from the guards who arrested Jesus. Jesus suddenly appears and tells them to not be afraid any longer; that they can now be at peace, no matter what comes their way, because Jesus was dead and is now alive.

Thomas was not there and he told the disciples he would not believe Jesus had rose unless he saw Jesus himself. So Jesus comes back and shows Thomas his wounds. I believe Jesus will do the same, by the way, for all those who struggle with believing in Jesus and the resurrection.

And then we come to Peter. Did you notice that Peter was naked in the passage? He is naked disciple #2 at the end of the gospels. The other disciple had his clothes grabbed by an arresting guard in the Garden. Their nakedness points to our vulnerability and guilt due to denying and abandoning Jesus and his lowly ones in their time of need.

But once Peter saw Jesus again on the shore, he put his clothes back on and jumped in the water. No more guilt or fear. Peter has been clothed with Christ.

That is what resurrection does! Resurrection completely overturns not only death itself but the power of sin and death in life as well. Women oppressed by their society were suddenly preaching and teaching. Fearful disciples locked in a room were sent back out into the world to preach the same things that got Jesus into trouble in the same place he got into trouble! Thomas who was filled with doubt is filled with joy and wonder and proclaims Jesus his Lord and God. And Peter, filled with the dread of denying his friend and teacher three times, now plays in the water as he sees Jesus, cooks around a campfire with him and gets the chance to tell him how much he loves him.

Friends, how could we not want more of this in our own lives? Because while we all deny and reject Jesus just like the disciples, what then? Will we be like Judas who was weighed him down with guilt and doubt to the point of death? I think Judas forgot how much Jesus loved him not only because of what he did but because he did not experience the risen Jesus.

And we sometimes doubt God and his love because we are not sure about resurrection and eternal life. And that gives darkness a foothold. 1. We feel empty and we turn to things other than God to fill the emptiness. 2. And of course, they do not fill anything and instead we are just weighed down more.

But here is the thing-- Jesus' Spirit and body are here now, speaking to you, just as he did to Peter. "Come and have a little breakfast with me. Remember all the good things and let go of the bad. All that matters is that I was dead and behold, I am alive again."

I really believe that these two things are all that matter: 1. God and Jesus loves us even more than we love our own families; 2. and Jesus rose from the grave. The latter is critical as proof of the former. The resurrection is the only certain proof that God loves us.

A great Presbyterian writer named Anne Weems died this week. Her son Todd was murdered on the night of his 21st birthday. You can imagine her grief and bewilderment. Her friend and the great scholar, Walter Brueggemann, once asked her a question which he said she did not need to answer if she did not want to. The question was from the Psalms. 'Will Rachel finally be comforted?' Rachel here refers to Israel whose extended family members were exiled to Babylon. It also refers to the massacre of the infants by King Herod around the time of Jesus' birth. Ann thought about whether there might ever be comfort after her son's murder and responded, "No. Not until God wipes away every tear."

If there is no resurrection, then exile and separation and death and dissolution win. And there is no comfort.

But a loving God would never let death win. If you believe in a creator of life...; would he not be like any loving Father and Mother who only wants life for His children? Can I get an amen? (Gotta loosen up you Presbyterians every once in a while.)

That is one reason why Jesus had to die— that the whole world might know eternal life. Because knowing eternal life is the second step in The Great Reversal; the great restoration heralded by Peter. Life wins, not death. Love wins, not apathy or absence.

And resurrection is not just proof of God's love. It is the driving force of our love for others. Nothing but resurrection empowers us to love as Jesus calls us to love. Peter thought he was strong and tough and would never deny Jesus. And he was wrong. He was afraid of death.

But when he saw Jesus, he was transformed into the rock upon whom Jesus could build his church. And Peter's going back to the temple to proclaim Jesus is only part of the picture. Jesus tells Peter three times the consequence of loving him. "Take care of my sheep." This is the charge of Jesus to the church.

And in very divisive times for Christianity and our nation, it is very easy to get caught up in church doctrine and politics. And they, of course, important but here Jesus brings us back to what really matters in those regards and every regard...loving and taking care of God's children.

What a charge it is considering every person is a child of God. How can we give up our wealth for the sake of the poor? How can we love the unlovable? Even our enemies? And forgive people seventy times seven times? How can we teach the ignorant and heal the sick and visit the lonely? And do all of this over and over, day in and day out? This is only possible by trusting in the promise of eternal life.

And as we trust this and go out into God's world to interact with and care for others, the more we come to realize they are all God's children, all our brothers and sisters, worthy of love and care. You can see this common humanity, by the way, in a wonderful new Iranian movie called "Taxi" which is now streaming on Netflix.

So search great movies and books; search the world and the peoples of God. Search your hearts. Search the scriptures. Search the great minds who have looked into these matters. Search and you will find. You will come to believe and trust in life and love...and everything wonderful that comes with them. Search because the choice before us is stark. Either everything we hold dear and which brings meaning, purpose, joy and love are utterly and completely emptied of their power by the victory of death and a spiritless world. Or...or all of these wonderful things of the Spirit; these things from the Kingdom of heaven fill our lives to the brim and to overflowing. That has been my experience.

There were many times when Anne Weems, the poet who had lost her son, could not be comforted. But we can trust that in her end, comfort has finally come. Anne had glimpses into this comfort while she lived as well. I will conclude with a part of one of her poems:

When you hear of my demise  
Don't believe a word of it!  
Our God is the God of the living  
And I am living still!  
If it were not so  
He would have told us!  
Don't believe a word of it!...  
And whatever you do  
Please please please  
Don't eulogize me!  
Gather instead for worship!  
Remembering that Jesus is  
the way, the truth, the life,  
Gather to celebrate life with scripture and prayer  
With jazz band, with choirs, with pipers, with dancing

Follow with faithfulness the life you have been given!

I left this earth in Alleluias  
Dancing with the angels of life  
Among the stars of God.

Resurrection hope allowed Anne to endure and even live as God called her to live. Some of you have lost children. The rest of us have all lost loved ones and gone through many trials. Some of you may be going through one now. Jesus made it through his and he will get you through yours. And may the hope of Jesus keep us singing and dancing and loving the wonderful gift of life and all God's children on earth with whom we share it. And God's people say...

