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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/18/2010, Easter 3C
John 21:1-21
What Is That to Thee?

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²¹Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?

²²Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, *what is that to thee? follow thou me.* (John 21:21-22, KJV)

This is such an important saying to me, that I want immediately to make my main point, lest we lose the forest for the trees. The main point is this: *Jesus bids us to follow him, and we do well to obey. Aye, we do well to come a'running.* Jesus asks us to follow him *always*, through good times and bad, through thick and thin, through weal and woe, through blessing and affliction, through certainties and mysteries. Let nothing distract us from following him. So, let it storm around us, then. Let darkness settle, lightning bolts flash, fog disorient, winds hurl themselves against us, and waves toss us up to the sky: whatever befalls us or tempt us, let us keep our eye on Jesus who says to us each one: "What is that to thee? follow thou me." And at the end of the sermon, I mean to tell you why -- why we should do as Jesus says and follow him.

So, I have gotten that off my chest and off my heart: Let us follow Jesus with single-mindedness and whole-heartedness. "Follow me," Jesus says, "and let nothing put you off from that." Now, let me try to develop this main idea.

This is not an unkind saying, this divine rhyme about discipleship, but it is a firm one, a challenging one. "What is that to thee? follow thou me." Our Lord here bids Peter to whole-hearted discipleship. Christ means for the man to follow him, undeterred by puzzles, questions, and mysteries. Christ bids Peter to follow him, even when the path ahead is unclear, even threatening.

That Peter's path ahead is threatening, well, that is what troubles Peter. That is why he shifts the conversation away from himself to the Beloved Disciple. Peter is without guile. He is as plain and clear as daylight. Jesus has just prophesied his martyrdom, and Peter does not like the thought, so he tries to change the subject. Jesus speaks of constraint, of being led where Peter does not want to go, but is helpless to resist:

¹⁸Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹(This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) (John 21:18-19, RSV)

In the course of time, our Lord's prophecy comes true for Peter. He dies the death of a martyr in Rome. Tradition has it that he was crucified head down, perhaps at his own request, feeling unworthy to die upright as our Lord had died.



Michelangelo Merisi, aka Caravaggio: *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, 1600
Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.

A couple years ago, Carol and I celebrated our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary by visiting Italy, including Rome. There in Rome we toured the "Scavi," which are the archeological excavations beneath Saint Peter's Basilica. To the surprise of modern archeologists, the bones of St. Peter seem actually to be preserved there beneath the high altar of the Basilica. Carbon dating, the peculiar wounds to the bones, and the special location of the bones suggests that they are really those of the saint. Carol and I found it very moving to look upon them. They

were a kind of tangible evidence of the brutal end to St. Peter's life, when he was executed as a kind of entertainment to satisfy Roman bloodlust.

But that is down the road for Peter. Here, in this morning's story, Peter is still young and strong, and he does not much like our Lord's talk of his eventual death.

Let me place this scene in some context. In the Passion story, in Peter's moment of crisis, when Jesus was being held by the guards and Peter was being questioned by the maid, three times Peter had denied that he knew Jesus. "I know not the man!"¹ In this morning's Easter story, Jesus, as it were, heals Peter's threefold denial. As Peter had denied Jesus three times, so Jesus gives Peter a chance to speak of his love for Jesus:

¹⁷He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? (John 21:17a, KJV)

Three times Peter affirms his love. And three times Jesus bids Peter to ministry in the church:

And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. (John 21:17b, KJV)

This morning's Gospel Lesson is the great reconciliation scene in which Jesus permits Peter to get back on track. The threefold denial is replaced with a threefold affirmation of love and call to ministry.

So, that is one respect in which this morning's Easter story parallels and heals the earlier Passion story.

But, to my mind, there is another parallel between this Easter story and the preceding Passion story. It is the unrelenting call to walk in a certain path. What I mean is this: In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus had first walked the path he now bids Peter to walk. In that Garden, in the midst of his fear and anguish, Jesus had fought through to victory and resolved to follow the will of his heavenly Father:

³⁹And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but *as thou wilt*. (Matthew 26:39, KJV)

Now, in this Easter story, Jesus asks Peter to the same kind of submission. "What is that to thee, Peter, follow thou me."

It is a sovereign saying. It is the saying of Someone who well deserves to be obeyed and who has indeed won the right to ask for loyalty. If it were a coward asking Peter to follow, if it had been a self-indulgent man who had bid Peter to

¹ Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. (Matthew 26:74, KJV)

follow him, perhaps Peter could not be blamed for disregarding the call. But the one who speaks to Peter is the one who has walked Peter's walk before him. Jesus has followed the path of love and sacrifice for others, all the way to the Cross, and now he asks Peter to follow him. Follow Jesus, and do not be deterred by anything!

As I mention in my Pastor's Introduction in this morning's worship folder, I believe that this divine rhyme from our Gospel Lesson has helped keep me on track some in my Christian life. "What is that to thee? follow thou me." There are two lines in this rhyme and two themes. So far I have been talking about the second line and its characteristic: "Follow thou me." It is an unrelenting call to discipleship. In this saying, Jesus lays claim to the man.

Now I want to speak of that first line. It is a question -- a rhetorical question: "What is that to thee?" Most immediately this question refers to the fate of the Beloved Disciple, John. Because Peter was uneasy about his own martyrdom, he shifts the conversation toward John. But Jesus will not hear of it. It is as if Jesus is saying to Peter, "Do not speak of John. Do not dwell on him. Do not let the fate of that man distract you from my will *for you*. Indeed, let nothing confuse you, distract you, tempt you, or dishearten you. Instead, set aside all other things and come, follow me. Long ago, by the seaside back when you were a fisherman, I bade you to follow me. Now, I call you again. What is that to thee? follow thou me."

I take our Lord's question to refer to *anything* that might tempt us away from him. Jesus would not have us break stride with him. He forever follows the path of love, and he bids us follow him. In the individual complex of responsibilities, opportunities, and temptations that confront you, keep your eye trained on Jesus and follow him and his life of love.

This call to Peter is not meant just for him, but also for you and me. Indeed, when we get up from our pews this morning and come to the Blessed Sacrament, take this morning's words to heart and apply them to yourself, for this same resurrected Jesus who called Peter now calls you, "What is that to thee, follow thou me."

In blessing and in affliction, then, let us follow Jesus. Blessing and affliction: these are different conditions of life, but in each of them, let us follow Jesus. With the time that remains to me, then, let me speak of these two - blessing and affliction - to urge us to follow on behind Jesus. Then I want to end by speaking of why we should do as Jesus says, "Follow me."

At first glance, it might seem easy to follow Jesus in times of blessing. I fear that this is not always so. Indeed, a multitude of blessings can end up tempting us away from the Lord, either because we become preoccupied with so many pleasant things or because we become caught betwixt and between too many good options. We become fixated by indecision, grieving that we cannot do everything at once. After all, we cannot be two people at the same time. We have to make some choices in life and live with them.

Let me give you an example. I know a pastor who could have been a medical doctor and who would have loved to be one. He would have been a great one too, I am sure. His medical practice would have been a strong blessing to whatever town or village or city in which he lived. Yet, it is too late for that. Ten years down the road, he will be retiring from the ordained ministry. He has spent a magnificent career as a parish pastor in upstate New York, especially in Buffalo. He has been a strong blessing in his ministry. So, I imagine him struggling with a mystery: that he cannot live two lives at the same time. He cannot be in two places at the same time. Part of him is truly incomplete without being a medical doctor, yet it must remain incomplete, since he is not a physician of the body, but a physician of the soul. And so, he must and he can entrust this mystery to Christ and to heaven. Meanwhile, what is that to thee? follow thou me?

Likewise with you. You might honestly be able to say, "If circumstances were different, I would do such and such. It would do my heart much good. Indeed, I feel somewhat parched and incomplete without it." If this is so for you, then you are caught up in a multitude of blessings, but do not let your blessings distract you from following Christ. You cannot be two people at the same time, you cannot follow two vocations at the same time. And so you must let the saying of Jesus measure you and guide you, "What is that to thee? What is the reality that you *could be* doing something else... what is that to thee? Follow thou me."

Again, about following Jesus in times of blessings, many sensitive souls have read the papers about the tragedies in this world and have wondered, "Why have I been spared them? Why have I been so blessed? Why do I have so much when so many people in this world have so little?" These are wonderful questions, but in a way, we have to set them aside lest they distract us from following Jesus and in thus distracting us, rob us our best chance to do some good in a world that really needs some good.

Let me speak for a moment to the young people here this morning, including you young choir members visiting from Mattawan High School in Michigan. If you know that God has blessed you with talents, whether in Math or Science, Art or Music, or whatever, do not squander those blessings. Do not fight with one arm tied behind your back. Do not place yourselves at disadvantage in this world. Instead, take your talents and bring them running to Jesus. Let none of life's mysteries keep you from following him. Let that divine rhyme help guide you, "What is that to thee? follow thou me," including that following that offers our talents and strength to him.

And I then there is that other condition of life: affliction. In times of affliction too remain focused on Jesus. It was looming affliction that tempted Peter. He heard of his coming death, he wanted to turn away from it. But it is not worth turning away from death, from poverty, from ridicule, or from any affliction if in the process of turning away from them, we also turn away from Jesus. No, in this kind-hearted, but stern Gospel story, Jesus asks his people to fight through all the fog and mysteries and questions of life in order to keep stride with him. "What is that to thee, follow thou me."

Do not let any question turn you away from Jesus, for in the end, it cannot be good to stray from your Good Shepherd. This is the summit of this sermon. This is the why and the wherefore of our following Jesus. If some stranger comes to you and bids you to follow him, but he is a nitwit, then do not follow. If he who bids you follow is a commander who seeks only glory and cares not one whit for the lives of his soldiers, then do not follow. Of if the one who bids you follow is just an average, good hearted fellow who might well let you down in the long run, then do not follow without question.

But this is Jesus! This is the one who said to the threatening guards:

⁸Jesus answered, I have told you that I am he: if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way: (John 18:8, KJV)

And so it will always be: when sin, death, and the devil seek you, Jesus will say to them, "You seek me. Let these go their way."

This is Jesus, who is the Good Shepherd of the sheep. He is the one who came that they might have life, aye, and have it more abundantly. (John 10:10)

This is Jesus, the perfection itself of intelligence, virtue, mercy, and kindness.

This is Jesus, who gave his body and his blood that Peter, you, and I, might have eternal life.

And this is Jesus, who bids us follow him into an extravagant life of love, for we live in a world that needs fearless love -- love fortified by trust in the Good Shepherd, who alone is worthy of being followed, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.