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

Our Gospel reading for this morning is the story of the calling of the first disciples. Like John the Baptist before him, and Jonah before John, Jesus comes with the call to repent. But what Jonah could not say, and what John the Baptizer could not say, Jesus can and does, “Time is now fulfilled,” the whole purpose of time is now fulfilled; God’s purpose in creating is coming up to a climax. The whole sweep of history is now being fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is at hand, the Kingdom of God is now present, laying claim to the world. The Kingdom is at hand because the King is at hand. Jesus is here, and he comes calling disciples to himself. Peter and Andrew, James and John are the first of those people blessed to be called into close fellowship with Jesus.

Jesus walks by the busy Sea of Galilee, and calls these four fishermen to himself. Jesus’ words are received with the same authority as the words of Jonah by the people of Nineveh. “Yet forty days,” says Jonah, “and Nineveh shall be overturned!” And one of the great cities of antiquity repents of their sins. “Follow me,” says Jesus, “and I will make you fishers of men,” and four young men immediately leave all that is before them and do as they were commanded. They drop their nets, and follow Jesus, wherever he goes, they follow.

So Peter and Andrew, James and John are the first to be blessed with the call to discipleship. But they will not be the only ones. Jesus calls the other Twelve too, and will go on to call the whole world to himself. And this call continues to go out: Jesus calls you and me to be his disciples. Like those first disciples we are called to leave the old behind, we are called to be friends and followers of this good Master! We are called to begin a new life, leaving behind the former. Our old reality, our old life, is done—it is dead. We have to learn new ways of living, by following the one who is Life himself. We will have to learn a new rationality, following the one who is the foolishness of man but the very Wisdom of God. We must learn the ways of Jesus by following him as the first disciples did.

But precisely at this point there should be nothing obvious about where we fit into this passage, about how this could be a word from God to us. James and John, Peter and Andrew had Jesus himself walk up to them, Jesus in his flesh and blood reality, Jesus’ own body right before them, telling them to follow him. There was no ambiguity about what Jesus wanted them to do. There was Jesus before them, as plain as day, and they were told to follow him. If they could no longer see Jesus, if they could no longer see this same body, then something had gone wrong. “Come
with me, follow me.” Jesus tells them in no uncertain terms, “wherever I go, wherever I step, you come after me.”

And more than this, Jesus does not tell them simply to become fishers of men—as if they were able to do this on their own. It was unlikely that they had any idea what that might even mean. What is a fisher of men? All they knew was that this one before them promised to make them into something new. The disciples are not given a complex task, Jesus’ words are no mystery. Follow after this particular person, don’t let his body get out of your sight, and he will make you and your body into something new, something heretofore unimagined.

And this new thing that he is going to make them into, Jesus is there doing before them. Jesus was showing them precisely what it was he was going to make them into. He gives James and John, Peter and Andrew about as much opportunity for discussion as a fisherman gives his fish. Jesus walks by the Sea, but instead of casting a net he casts his word over them—his powerful, evocative word—and instead of catching fish, these men are captured by the power of the Word the Lord.

But what for us? Where is the one that we are to follow? Where is the one showing the new life that will be created in his disciples? Where is the Word with its power? The disciples knew literally every step to take, because they watched their master take that step right before they did. They never wondered where to go or what to do, because they had this particular body in front of them after which to follow. Where now is this body, where is this person?

Perhaps we think that the Christian life, Christian discipleship, would be easier if we had Jesus walking before us every step of the way and all we had to do was step after him. But after three years of the disciples following Jesus, Jesus would go to the Garden of Gethsemane and would ask his disciples to watch and pray with him. He would return but an hour later, and find the disciples fast asleep. Later that same evening, when Roman guards would come to arrest Jesus, the disciples would all scatter, leaving behind the body that they were to follow. When Jesus was put on trial, the only one bold enough to go with him was Peter, the same one who was the spokesman for the disciples. He continues his role in speaking for the other disciples, but this time, by denying Jesus three times; denying that he had ever even met this Jesus who three years before had said, “follow me.” The disciples could not follow this body wherever the body went. For this body, this flesh and blood reality, eventually went up on a cross, naked and alone, forsaken, isolated. Instead of his disciples being with him, this body would be put to death between two thieves, outcasts like himself.

But for this body, death was not the end of the story. For this body, death was but the penultimate climax. This body would not see decay. Like Jonah before him, this body would be thrust forth from the earth, this body would come forth from death. And for the disciples, this was good news indeed. The body that they had been told to follow, the one who said, “follow me,” was with them once again. But still, this following was shown to be difficult. Jesus had this little habit of appearing out of
nowhere, appearing in a room where there were only locked doors and disappearing in just the same manner. Clearly this body could not be followed in the same way as before it was crucified. After the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, he could not be followed in the same way, for his body had gone through death.

And to crown it all, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to leave them. He tells them that he is going to ascend to the Father’s right hand. From the very beginning, Jesus had simply asked that they follow him, do what he tells them to do, and he will make them into something new. But now he is going away—the body of the one that they followed was going to ascend into heaven. How can they follow him? How can we follow a body we cannot see? How can we follow a body that is in heaven?

But Jesus tells his disciples something utterly amazing, he tells them, “lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Wherever his disciples were to go, wherever they went, Jesus would be with them. It almost seems like the discipleship is reversed—and what a wondrous reversal! The beginning of discipleship was Jesus telling them to follow him wherever he went. Now he is saying to his disciples wherever they go he will be with them. How can this be?

Perhaps we see the clearest answer in John’s Gospel. There, Jesus looks forward to the day when he will no longer physically walk with his disciples. And so he tells his disciples how they will continue to have fellowship with him: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit; so shall you be my disciples. ... If you keep my commandments, you shall abide in my love” (John 15:7–8, 10). Jesus is telling us this, “whoever keeps my commandments abides in me, and I in them.” Post-resurrection discipleship is precisely having the word of Christ abide in us, dwell in us, obeying the Lord’s commandments. And having Christ's words dwell in us, obeying Christ’s commandments is to have Christ himself dwell in us. We do not simply walk with Jesus, he dwells in us, and we live in him.

But it remains to be asked: how does the word of Christ dwell in us? How can we accomplish having the word of Christ dwell in us? And here is where Jesus’ call to follow him comes to us after he has been resurrected. Jesus’ word dwells in us by attending to the very same body that the first disciples followed around Israel. The word of Christ dwells in us precisely by doing what the first disciples were called to do: attend to the body of Christ, the body of the Lord. But, where is this body to be found?

Throughout the letters of Paul, he gives us the answer to this question. Paul frequently refers to the Church as the Body of Christ. Well, this is no mere metaphor, this is the reality—the flesh and blood reality of Jesus. It is within the Church that we hear the words of Christ, where we hear his word read to us, where we hear the proclamation of this word in hymns and psalms, in prayers and in sermon, and it is in the Church that we eat this Word’s Body in Bread and Cup. So discipleship, after the resurrection, looks exactly like how the first Christians were described in the first chapters of Acts, “those who received the word were baptized, ... And devoted
themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:41–42).

The Lord Jesus Christ might not walk up to you while you are at your vocation in this world and tell you to drop whatever is at hand and follow him, but he calls you now to come, to hear and receive his words, he calls you now to come and receive his life-giving flesh in Bread and in Cup, and he calls us now to obey his commandments, loving him and his Father above all else, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. For it is in this that our discipleship consists, and it is what the world needs more than anything else, for “by this,” says Jesus, “all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). So it is here, around this very Table, around these words, that we, like James and John, Peter and Andrew before us, it is here that we encounter Jesus in his flesh and blood reality, Jesus’ own body. It is here that Christ comes to dwell in us and we in him. It is right here, in this very place, that you ought to be.

So, I say to you, Well done! You are right where you ought to be: in church, in the presence of the Lord who has called us in the waters of Baptism to be his disciples. Take heart, for it is here that we are made new. It is here that Christ’s life is given to us, so that we might be earnest disciples of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.