

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter cycle C

It's a unique experience which few people will ever have: losing someone to death, or so it would seem, and then getting them back. It happens but rarely: the man who misses the airplane that never reaches its destination; rare cases of mistaken identity; people lost in the wilderness for an amount of time that defies hope, but who manage to emerge alive. And what a feeling that must be, to see a loved one, who at least for a moment had been given up for dead, walk through the door again. Such must have been the feelings the apostles experienced as Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection: not only a cause for amazement, but a cause for rejoicing. They must have grown close as friends and companions during those many months when they followed him about, as he preached and taught; and their sorrow was true sorrow when he was laid in the tomb. And so their rejoicing must have been real rejoicing of that sort rarely known, when one who was thought to be lost is known to not be lost after all.

In the reading today from the Gospel of John, Peter reacts with jubilation at the appearance of Jesus; and why not? Jesus was his friend, his teacher, his very life; no doubt, he just enjoyed being in our Lord's company. We can picture Peter and the others out at sea, at such a distance that they could still communicate back and forth from sea to shore, but not close enough to really make out a face at that distance. And as soon as John says to Peter, "it's the Lord!" Peter's so excited that he just can't wait: he jumps out of the boat, and swims as quickly as he can to the shore. The episode bespeaks a lot about the feelings which Peter had for Jesus; how anxious must he have been to be in Jesus' presence again that he would jump ship and swim ashore? It should cause us to ask, how excited are we about "going to Jesus?" Do we have a passion for our faith, a passion so strong that we can feel it in our hearts? Feelings are something that we have to be careful with: they're subjective after all, something truly proper to the one who holds them; they're not grounded in objective truth. You can't tell me that you know I'm sad because I've had things happen to me that normally make people sad; my reactions are my reactions, we're people, not robots; and we respond emotionally to things as we will. Feelings are unreliable: unlike truth, which is always the same— $2 + 2 = 4$ , each time you add it up; feelings change from day to day, even from one moment to the next; the thing that really ticked me off royally yesterday, I may just shrug off with a laugh today. And because they are so fluid, and subjective, and not really rooted in truth—and certainly, having a certain feeling for something hardly makes something true—feelings really don't define love. But if feelings are not the cause, they are usually the effect, and as

such, serve as a not unhandy barometer of where we're at; a measure of love, as it were. We know, objectively, that love is not merely a feeling but an act of the will. But it's not a bad thing to let our love for Jesus reflect itself in an emotional way, wherein we actually feel something when we approach him at communion, or when we kneel down in prayer. If we don't feel anything about Jesus, or Mary, or the saints, or the church, then perhaps we would be well served to spend more time thinking about them, learning about them, and communicating with them; making sure that that act of the will which we call love is truly that, and that it hasn't become just a cold acceptance, but is a genuine human reaction to God's invitation to a life—and an eternity—of grace.

Once on shore, Peter then makes his proclamation of love for Jesus: not once, not twice, but three times Jesus asks him, "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter answers each time "yes Lord, I love you." Puts it in words; says it out loud. Just as feelings are useful, but not completely reliable barometers of love, so too are words useful, but not one hundred percent reliable. Heaven knows that saying something doesn't make it true, and that man is capable of saying one thing and meaning another, and of telling out and out lies. But saying something out loud does give witness; does not make something true but attests to the truth. And as Peter was asked there on the seashore, so too does Jesus ask us fairly routinely, "do you love me?" Do we answer? Are we willing to proclaim our love for Jesus so that those around us know what we believe, and how we feel? Is there any visible or audible evidence at all that says "yes Lord, you know that I love you"? There is, and much of it occurs right here: kneeling before him during the Eucharistic prayer, making all the responses, saying "amen" to the prayers of the church and exclaiming "glory to God in the highest." But there should be other visible and audible signs outside of this place as well. Family prayer, statues and pictures in the home, devotions; refusing to engage in certain actions and activities and saying to whomever asks us to engage in those actions "sorry, but my faith doesn't allow me to do that." There are so many ways in which, like Peter, we can put it in words, that we can say "yes Lord, you know that I love you."

After Jesus asks Peter a third time if Peter loves him, Peter becomes distressed. Jesus is just giving Peter a three-fold opportunity to atone for his previous three-fold denial, but to Peter, it sounds as if Jesus isn't accepting the words he's speaking. So after the third time, Peter says to him "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." And it's true: Jesus does know everything, and he knows whether or not Peter loves him, and he knows whether or not we love him. And so, when Jesus says to Peter, "feed my sheep," it

becomes a matter not of feeding them IF Peter loves Jesus, because Jesus knows he does; feed them, Peter, BECAUSE you love your Lord. Follow Jesus, Peter, BECAUSE you love him. With our faith, comes a mandate to do something: not because we have to prove to an all-knowing God that we love him, because he knows whether we do or not, but because doing his will is a natural extension of our love, and his will is most often (not exclusively, but most often) manifested in our vocations. Peter was given his vocation, to serve as the one apostle around whom the others would gather, the first among the apostles, the visible head of the Church; and as our current Holy Father, Benedict the 16<sup>th</sup>, continues to preach the Gospel and teach the faithful, and give his life for the flock, he too is answering “yes Lord, you know that I love you.” And we are challenged in each of our vocations. Each time a penitent comes in 30 seconds before confessions are supposed to end, after I’ve sat in there with no activity for 15 minutes, I can hear Jesus asking me “do you love me?” Then hear this confession. As spouses, when your wife forgets to record yet another check, when your husband leaves his socks on the bedroom floor again, there’s Jesus, with whom you took your vows, asking “do you love me?” Then don’t sweat the small stuff. As parishioners, when we are called to volunteer, called to contribute, called to forgive, there stands Jesus asking “do you love me?” Then make a difference. And telling us, not just IF you love me, but BECAUSE you love me: show patience; be forgiving; be generous; be kind; feed my sheep. Not so that he who knows everything knows that we love him, but so that we who know so imperfectly can see that our words, our actions, and yes, our feelings, all say the same thing: and what they say, together in a beautiful spiritual harmony, is that Jesus is my Savior; and I believe in him, and I will follow him.

It is possible to love people without having very “loving feelings” for them; to desire what is best for them, their good in the here and especially in the hereafter, is the most important kind of love. It is possible to love somebody without ever saying the words “I love you” to them. But it is impossible to love without fulfilling the conditions of love. Feelings are good and reassuring, words give nice witness. But fulfilling the mandate our Lord gave us: whether that mandate is to feed his sheep, to love another person until death do you part, to reject sin, or to help build up his kingdom here on earth, will be how we give our answer. I hope that all of us here do love the Lord; and because we do, I hope we’ll feel it, I hope we’ll say it, and mostly I hope we’ll live it; and not in the way of our choosing, but in the way in which he uniquely calls each of us.