

Sermon – John 21:1-19  
David R. Lyle  
Grace Lutheran Church  
3 Easter – Year C  
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“Simon and Saul, Community and Call”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

1. On July 14, 1941, Great Britain was mired in fearful uncertainty. The horrors of the Battle of Britain and the constant bombardment by the German Luftwaffe were a thing of the past, but darkness still hung heavy over the island. The Nazis held most of Europe and hope hung by a thread. So Winston Churchill did what he did best, offering a stirring speech to his fellow Britons. Near the close of his remarks, Churchill said simply, to Germany and on behalf of his people, “You do your worst – and we will do our best.” And as we know, Great Britain and her allies did exactly that – their best – to turn back the tide of evil that threatened to overwhelm the world but that, in the end, could not overcome those who stood up to fascism and tyranny, to the machine of death that Hitler had unleashed.
2. You do your worst – and we will do our best. Stirring words when we are on the side of right. But what about when we aren't? What about those times when we do our worst? What about the times when we, in sin, deal out hate and pain, insult and injury? When we have done our worst, we know that others will often do their worst in return. When we unleash violence, violence is the expected return on our investment. When we hurt a friend or turn our back on our community, we know that we will most likely be treated in kind. And because this is how we respond to one another, this is also how we imagine God will deal with us, or at least, we hope, how God will deal with our enemies, releasing righteous judgment and meeting sin with punishment.

3. Our readings today present us with two people, two men, who had done their worst. Peter, we know, turned his back on Jesus, his friend and teacher. Although he had followed Jesus for three years, witnessing the love and the hope that the Son of God came to earth to reveal, in the end Peter had nothing to offer but his worst. In the darkest moments of Jesus' life, Peter turned his back on Jesus, denying he even knew the man. And what of Saul, this righteous Pharisee? He, who claimed to follow the ways of God but instead persecuted the people of the true Way, holding the coats for those who stoned Stephen and breathing threats and murder against all those who proclaimed the resurrection – what of Saul? Denial of a friend and murder of the faithful. What could be worse? If the life of Jesus were a standard-issue Hollywood blockbuster, we'd see Jesus emerging from the tomb and stalking toward Peter in anger; "You think you'll get away with denying me?! You've got another thing coming, buddy!" You'd have Jesus parachuting onto the Damascus road in righteous fury to give Saul exactly what Saul deserves. You'd see, we might expect, Jesus giving his worst to Saul and the one formerly known as Simon, and that would be the end of that.
  
4. And yet, oddly enough, John the evangelist and Luke the historian tell a radically different set of stories. On the beach, during the third appearance of the risen Christ to the disciples, Jesus does not seek vengeance against the denier; he doesn't even chastise him. Instead, he offers Simon the threefold opportunity to profess his love for Jesus and his threefold commission to tend the sheep of God's flock. On the road to Damascus, Jesus doesn't return violence for violence, instead blinding Saul to the old ways of death and judgment so that his eyes can be opened to the truth of Jesus, the one who has dealt with sin and death so that forgiveness and life may abound beyond measure. Simon is reaffirmed as Peter, the rock of the Church; Saul the Pharisee becomes Paul, known now by his Latin name as the one who will bring God's gospel to the gentiles and to the ends of the earth. In the face of

the worst these two men could muster, Jesus offers God's best – forgiveness and life. And with forgiveness and life come the gifts of community and purpose. They are no longer separated by their sin from God and others, but are fully welcomed into the family of God; they are no longer directionless or moving against God's will, but receive the highest calling possible – sharing the gospel with others so that they, too, might be restored to God's Kingdom.

5. Forgiveness is not an easy thing for us, either to give or to receive. We're just not quite used to it; we are too accustomed to claiming an eye for an eye, to seeking a pound of flesh. Except when love is present, truly present – there and then, through love, forgiveness becomes the most natural thing in the world, for it is the way of the One who created the world. I learn this lesson most clearly through being a parent. After all, even though my children are clearly the most perfect children in the history of the world, they have the capacity to test me with their worst. I still recall an afternoon several years ago, when Greta was three, and offered me her worst by means of two comments. First, after doing a bit of household repair, Greta asked me how I could do such amazing things. I responded, "I'm a superhero." She looked at me askance and said, "You're no superhero." Then, a few minutes later, a song came on the radio – "Whip My Hair," by Willow Smith, the daughter of Will Smith, the movie star and rap artist. It's an annoying song to my way of thinking, but Greta liked it. The lyrics are little more than a repeated chorus of, "I whip my hair back and forth, I whip my hair back and forth." J.S. Bach it ain't! But I thought I'd join Greta in singing along. At which point she stopped me, looked at me, and said, "But Daddy, you don't have any hair!" Ouch. You're not a superhero and you're bald. Never mind that she spoke the truth on both counts, there are few things more painful that she could have said to me. But I had no trouble forgiving her. I love her and there's nothing that can change that. Love won't let another person's worst get in the way. Love forgives so that relationships and community can be restored and so that purpose can be found.

6. But what about real sin, and not the hard truths spoken by three-year-old girls? Today's readings are an invitation from Jesus to honestly see the worst in ourselves; the worst things we ever said or done or thought or failed to do; the things we hope no one ever finds out about. The things we know, deep down, that God does know about. Think about those things, those worst things, and then hear this: Your worst is simply not enough to undo what God has done for you through the living, dying, and rising of Jesus Christ, God's own and only Son. Your worst cannot change the best of what God has done. It didn't work for Simon Peter; it didn't work for Saul who by grace became Paul. And it won't work for you. God just plain loves you; loves you enough to let Jesus endure the cross and grave so that your old self might be put to death and your worst sins laid finally to rest at the foot of the cross. Jesus loves you, enough to die and come back from the dead to speak peace and life, to give community and purpose; to break you out of yourself, out of your tomb, and put you back in the flock, a sheep fed and tended to that you might feed and tend others.
  
7. In Jesus, God has decided to meet the worst this world has to offer head on. And in Jesus, we find that the worst of this world – its sin and separation, its directionless death – will not undo God's best. And in God's best we find what Jesus desires for us. We find ourselves called to a community of abundant life, overflowing with love for others, calling us to open our hearts and our hands to share what God has given us, as we do when we respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters in places like North Lawndale, helping God's people at Harmony Community Church meet the needs of their neighbors. We find ourselves called to preach the gospel, by claiming that God's love is enough and that we no longer need to seek retribution and instead can actually forgive one another and claim our togetherness in Christ Jesus. For the One who was dead now lives, and there is nothing to stop God's redemptive work in and for the world.

8. So, my friends, whatever you've done, whatever your worst is, get over it. Jesus is over it; Jesus has dealt with it; Jesus will not let it stand in his way into your heart and into our church, our community, our world. He's given you his best; he's given you himself. As he shared a meal of love on the beach with his friends on that morning long ago, so now does he feed you with the best God has to offer, the very body and blood of the Son of God. Jesus loves you, Jesus forgives you, and you can't stop that. Sin and death couldn't, and neither can we. So with Peter and Paul, love Jesus. And feed his flock. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!