

Less than three months ago, I laid my hands on the Mensa Christi—the “table of Christ.” That’s the name of the rock where the Risen Christ built a charcoal fire to cook breakfast for the disciples in our Gospel reading. The “Mensa Christi” is partially inside a modest Franciscan church called “The Church of the Primacy of St. Peter,” on the shore of Sea of Galilee. The rest of the rock extends through the wall, becoming stairs that lead down to the sea; the sea that, in our reading, is called the Sea of Tiberias.

Now, we have to hold gently the identifications of historic sites in the Holy Land. People who visit Israel and Palestine looking to find places to *venerate* the mysteries of the faith tend to find what they are looking for, while people eager to pinpoint *exactly* where scriptural events took place are often disappointed.

And here, at the Church of the Primacy of Peter, the truth of inspired reverence utterly displaces considerations of empirical truth. There are, in fact, historical and archeological reasons to identify this place as the site of the story in John’s Gospel: a woman called Egeria wrote about this rock in 380 C.E. and there are clear remnants of a 4<sup>th</sup> c. C.E. church surrounding this holy site. But almost *despite* the reasonable historical support, there is a more persuasive truth radiating from this place. What fairly pulses from the limestone inside the church, flowing down the steps outside and wafting out to the lakeside is nothing short of holiness—*spiritual* truth.

Historically, this is simply a place where an unfaithful man was forgiven by his teacher who entrusted him with a new mission. Spiritually, this is a place that breathes resurrection, reconciliation and love inspired by Peter’s encounter with the Risen Christ.

The story opens in the context of brokenness and disappointment. Jesus has appeared for a third time, unrecognizable as the man broken on the cross, even though he still bears the wounds. The shattered dreams for a messiah who would conquer the Romans hang in the air like morning mist across the sea. Nothing has gone the way the disciples expected, but Peter has been carrying a tremendous burden of guilt and disappointment in himself. He

promised Jesus to be loyal unto death, but when the time came, he could not bring himself to walk beside his friend.

Peter could see the right thing to do and could not bring himself to *do* it, despite being given three chances. The other disciples have experienced joy and astonishment as the reality of the resurrection began to take hold of them. Thomas has rightly named the Risen Christ as “my Lord and my God,” but something for Peter remains unaddressed. He is burdened with a painful, unwelcome memory.

Now, there are those who find fault with Peter’s decision to go fishing, but I can’t do that. I don’t see Peter’s instinct to go fishing as an act of resignation. I imagine Peter grasping for something solid, trying perhaps to retrace his steps or to reenact the situation where Jesus first asked him to follow.

Dominican Sister Mary Catherine Hickert has pointed out that “all the resurrection experiences testify to hope born amid loss and pain. Hope emerges,” she writes, “in the power of God breaking forth in new imaginings and new energy. Beyond grief the disciples discover it is possible to love again, to trust that one is forgiven, to get on with life, to invest new energy in the people and the mission that have been entrusted to them.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Peter is looking from the depths of his shame and grief to find a way out. In our confusion and pain, we often return to tangible, reliable behaviors that we remember working for us in the past. Except that this time, fishing turns out to be less than successful. Again and again, these seasoned fishermen haul up empty nets. When Jesus speaks to them from the shoreline, the Beloved Disciple makes the connection and says to Peter, “It is the Lord!” The Beloved Disciple’s natural gift is discernment but rarely action. Peter’s nature is action but with less contemplative discernment. Peter dresses himself and leaps into the sea.

Divine déjà vu ensues, as Jesus once again gathers broken pieces to be raised up: an unproductive fishing net becomes filled to overflowing; one discerning disciple has prompted another guilt-ridden friend into action; and the abundance of God’s creation is being brought to Jesus to be blessed and

---

<sup>1</sup> Hilkert, Mary Catherine. *Naming Grace*. New York: Continuum, 1997.

shared with the bread that he breaks for them. Resonance with a similar event that happened not 75 yards down the beach are surely not lost on the disciples.

One thing *is* different.

As the rest of the disciples make their way back to shore in the boat, a dripping wet Peter walks up the rocky beach toward a charcoal fire. Now, there are only two charcoal fires mentioned in the New Testament.

Both are in John's Gospel. One is here.

The other is a fire that we heard about in the gathering darkness of the Passion Gospel on Good Friday. Peter was warming himself by a charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard, when he had the opportunity to claim and prove his steadfast faithfulness to Jesus in the face of certain suffering and death. Instead, he denied three times that he even knew Jesus, just as Jesus said he would.

Since the moment that the cock crowed while Peter stood at a charcoal fire before the crucifixion, he has been ashamed, broken and disappointed in himself. Now, Peter sits next to another charcoal fire, but *this* one was built by the Risen Christ. Here by the shores of the sea, Jesus offers Peter and all his disciples life. In what must surely be one of the most loving, intimate, ordinary lines in scripture, Jesus says: "Come and have breakfast."

When this remarkable sacred but commonplace breakfast is over, Jesus turns his attention again to Peter. The other disciples fade into the background as the story draws us into an intimate conversation. Jesus begins to wash away Peter's heartbreaking guilt with a question: "Do you love me?" The first time, this question surely stings.

Jesus doesn't seem interested in rationalizing Peter's behavior or fixing Peter's brokenness, but in washing Peter's pain with resurrection life. Gently, insistently, Jesus repeats the question, peeling back the layers of Peter's defenses until he reaches the core of Peter's guilt and pain. "Do you love me?" Twice Peter tells Jesus, "Lord, you know that I love you." And twice Jesus names the next step: "Feed my sheep."

After the third time, Peter is sufficiently vulnerable to give voice to his pain, crying out: "Lord, you know everything! You know that I love you." And, indeed, Jesus does know everything—the disloyalty and the guilt, and also the

love that Peter still holds. He sees Peter inside and out, and looks at him with love instead of condemnation. Peter's threefold confession of love for Jesus overcomes his threefold disloyalty. Jesus has brought Peter back into right relationship, reconciling Peter to God and also to the deepest, truest part of himself with a deceptively simple phrase: "Follow me."

Now, most of us have experienced or will at some point in our lives experience something like Peter's guilt—the conviction that we have done, or been, something so unworthy that even to acknowledge it seems too painful, too overwhelming. And yet resurrection experiences—experiences of the saving love of the Risen Christ—*still* testify to hope born amid loss and pain.

None of us escapes this life unbroken. Our hope is borne of the trust that God loves us not *in spite* of our brokenness, but *because* of it. The Risen Christ fed Peter and put him back on the path of resurrection life, a holy path of brokenness, forgiveness and reconciliation. A path that includes suffering for Jesus' sake, but a path that ends in the Risen life of Christ.

Maybe that's the true "primacy" of Peter. Not that he's the first among Christians as a ruler of the church; but that he is the first model for all of us disciples who come along later, broken in our own ways, carrying guilt, pain or shame. Maybe Peter is the first model of what it truly means to be healed by the Risen Christ, and to be invited to follow him into the resurrection life.

We can, each of us, be filled like the disciples' nets, filled to overflowing with the love of God whenever the Risen Christ calls to us, "Children!" Hear that voice this morning and recognize the Risen Christ inviting us again to join in the resurrection life, to be filled with the bread of life.

It is Easter; our Lenten fast is over; our sin is forgiven. Christ is waiting to gather in and transform our brokenness into holy fractures through which the light and love of God can shine for the world. The fire is built and the "Table of the Lord"—this "Mensa Christi"—is about to be set.

Come, then, have breakfast. And then go out to follow Him, who is the feast.