

**Easter 3, 2007**

**John 21**

**After the Virginia Tech Massacre**

**Sermon by The Rev. Paul Hinlicky**

Christ is risen! Since he lives, we too shall live.

This is indeed the word from God, the *only* word, that consoles us and renews us after the hard blow from that last enemy, the power of death, which this community has suffered. *Since he lives, we too shall live.* This is the hope of the resurrection which we have in Christ Jesus: that every wrong will be righted, every tear wiped away, every sorrow soothed eternally. It is a hope for the future, the *final* future; it does *not* therefore erase the sorrow of the present, but only puts it in ultimate perspective, so that we do not grieve as them who have no hope.

But grieve we must and grieve we do. Our present sorrow is very real. So many dear, irreplaceable, precious lives snuffed out. The killer a pathetic lost soul. All the “what ifs?” We just ache at it all. And there is no solution for this present aching but to endure it in faith, to share it in love, to learn from it in hope, at length by the grace of God to heal some and perhaps to become something better because of it.

Paul the Apostle told us just two weeks ago on Easter morning: *If in this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all people most to be pitied.* In this life bad things happen to good people, God causes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike, and his sun to shine alike on the wicked and the righteous. In this life we always find ourselves athwart equally good values that are in conflict with one another—between freedom and security, between the rights of individuals and the needs of the community, between the protection due the marginal and rewards due the successful—such tensions abide as long as life itself; they can never be permanently solved in this life. They are part and parcel of our fallen world.

We have therefore to live courageously in these tensions, in the courage of faith, sailing the ship in the time allotted us between these shoals, yet hopeful in Christ the risen Lord that the great Day of God surely comes when such tragic conflicts shall cease, and the ship brought safely home to port, and the sounds of people singing will never again be lamentations but only alleluias to God and the Lamb. In the meantime the psalms of the church such as we sing and pray this morning give us words to speak the heartbreak we feel, even as they turn us in life and in death to the one and only solid rock in every pounding storm, Jesus Christ, to shift the metaphor: pilot of the soul, captain of the ship.

How to live now, dear Christian people, after a massive crime? after a heartbreak? after a disillusionment? It is right to fight against the “seductive temptation to hate,” as campus pastor Bill King said on Thursday. It is right for Christian people so to strive against this temptation, lest, like the killer himself, we too are overcome with evil. It is right to strive to overcome evil with good, as we in this parish heard all during the season of Lent. It is true, as Prof. Giovanni so eloquently said in the same convocation, that no one deserves a tragedy. Recrimination only compounds the cruelty of it all. The last thing we need is to give the devil any more victories.

Good as these counsels are, we need something more, don't we? As believing people we need to understand this catastrophe before God, in the presence of God, from God's perspective. *Not* I repeat as if to say what anybody has done to deserve a

random act of destruction and terror. That's *not* what I am talking about. Indeed with all people of good will, we want to work for a world where such events do not happen. But just so we need something more, and have something to learn from this evil that has befallen us, about what God wants us to become, how our God wants to make good out of this evil, Easter out of this Good Friday – our God, who spared not his own Son, our Jesus who is with us even in the godforsaken horror that transpired in AJ West and Norris on Monday. This is what I am talking about.

In his memoir of Auschwitz, *Night*, Elie Wiesel tells how he lost his childish faith in face of the brutal nightmare of the Nazi Holocaust. In one gripping scene, as the inmates are forced to watch an execution, one prisoner says: Where is God in this? Another answers: There is God, hanging on the gallows. This answer can mean two things. It means the death by disillusionment of all superstitious, magical, selfish religion, where God exists to do me favors because I do God the favor of believing in him. It can also mean the breakthrough to the real meaning of faith in God in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the real God who is with us in the thick of tragedy, even in the hour of the power of deepest darkness, that we may die to business as usual, also in religion, and rise up to the great task of the Kingdom of God. This is what we in the church are about, not a den of robbers, but a house of prayer for all people.

Now this is what I am talking about concretely. There may be much more to say. But I want to lift this up today: Neglected, abused, bullied children. Children who are not so lovable and as a result are scorned, mocked, ridiculed, persecuted, tortured. Children who fall through the cracks, for whom no one really cares, the nobodies. Children like this who grow up and finally explode – and great is the destruction.

At some level of his deranged consciousness, the killer tried to justify his actions and so he knew that he had yielded himself to the powers of darkness and refused the grace that could have healed him. That is his sole responsibility and irrevocable guilt. But it does us little good to demonize him. For a moment it may make us feel better, but it changes nothing. If we are to be changed, it does us good to recall that everyone one of us has likewise nursed petty resentments into murderous thoughts but, by the grace of God, we have withstood them because we are connected enough to life, to family, to community, to church.

Our gospel lesson this morning tells us about the confrontation of the risen Christ with his disciple Peter, who had denied him on the fateful night. Peter had survived that catastrophe. Jesus was captured and lead away to his death, the others got away. Peter too. But unlike the others, Peter had boasted that he would never deny the Lord, that he would suffer with the Lord and die too. But three times in the courtyard he vehemently denied that he knew Jesus or had anything to do with him. Perhaps that is why in today's story of Peter's restitution after Easter, Jesus asks Peter three times, Do you love me? as if undoing, one by one, those three denials Peter had made. Each time, when Peter avers that he does love Jesus, the reply is: *Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my lambs.*

This is how like Peter we can live after catastrophe in the power of forgiveness, love and hope in Christ: *The children, the children, the children. Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my lambs.*

For unbelievers, there is a so-called problem of evil. If God is so good and powerful, how can evil things like what happen Monday take place? So the unbeliever

would keep the God who spared not his own Son at arms length, accusing God of malice or impotence. We who live under the Cross of Jesus know however better. We have a different wisdom: that if you are not a part of God's solution to evil, you –your yourself- remain part of the problem of evil, which is not a mere philosophical riddle but personal and spiritual malady going to the root.

Uprooted by this crime, yes, but re-rooted in the crucified and risen Christ, we can now live as part of God's solution. *Feed my lambs*; Jesus says, *tend my sheep*; *feed my lambs*. Not the cruel old religion business, but Kingdom business. This is what we are to be about. God who raised Jesus from the dead raise us up to this new life. Amen. Christ is risen.