

Lent is over, Easter is done. It feels good to let things can get back to normal. But what is normal? For Paul, normal was going off to make a name for himself among the Pharisees by persecuting the Christians. For Peter, normal was going back to the life of fishing that he knew so well before. For Ananias, normal was certainly not to go out and lay hands on his deadly enemy. What is normal for us? Is normal going back to the way we lived before we experienced Easter, before we experienced the meaning of the resurrection? Is it just going back to work, or to our recreations, or to our everyday lives? Has Easter made any kind of a difference to us?

For Paul who encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, there was no way that he could return to normal. To go back to normal would have meant denying his experience with Jesus, denying that God had reached out to him in a special way. To go back to normal would mean living a lie. It must have been tempting though, just the same. To go on in the service of Jesus meant turning his back on all that he had learned among the Pharisees, it meant giving up his status among the Jews, it meant giving up his own planned career path. To go back to normal might mean living a lie, but it was a comfortable lie. Sometimes we wish that we would have such a dramatic encounter with Jesus as Paul's. Then there would be no questions. We would know the truth then, for sure. Then, we would not hold back, then we would dedicate ourselves to God, then we would not compromise with the world. But of course, God always leaves us the choice whether to live the truth or the comfortable lie. We are very good at finding ways to rationalize the comfortable choice. It is to Paul's credit that he fiercely chose to live in the truth, no matter what it cost him.

Ananias was also drawn out of his normal life by God's intervention. Ananias was told by God that he was to go lay hands on Paul, in order to restore his sight. But Ananias knew Paul

only as a persecutor of the Christians, Paul was the enemy. I'm sure that it was with great fear that Ananias went and did as he was told. For Ananias, normal was to stay with other Christians, to circle the wagons for self-preservation, and be suspicious of those outside the small group. But Ananias learned that God's love is expansive, that it takes in even those who fight against him. He learned that he had to love even his enemies. The risen Jesus called Ananias out of his normalcy.

And then there is Peter. Peter tried to run back to his normal life, even after he had seen the risen Christ. For Peter, normal was fishing. Nets and fish were what he knew; a boat was where he was most comfortable. It was a natural enough thing to do. When we feel overwhelmed or discouraged, we too want to go back to our comfort zones, and Peter was quite overwhelmed by the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection. How could he understand any of it? He felt guilty and unworthy for denying Christ three times. He didn't know what to do next, there was no one to follow. All that was left to do was get back to normal. "I'm going fishing," he said.

But then Jesus meets him again for breakfast by the lake. He meets the risen Christ one more time, and normal will never be the same again. Jesus asks him, "Peter, do you love me?" Three times Jesus asks this. Three times to correspond to the three times that Peter denied him. Three times to forgive and to take away the guilt and unworthiness. Three times to give Peter new purpose, new life. Feed my lambs, feed my sheep.

As we read it, Jesus' question, "Do you love me?" seems to become increasingly poignant each time it is asked. The first time Peter answers almost off hand. "Of course I love you." It is a superficial answer, a too ready response. A response that requires no real commitment. So Jesus asks again, "Do you really love me?" In other words – "Think about this,

Peter. I am asking you to give up what you think is normal for me.” This is not just some feeling of affection for his teacher. This is like getting married, to change his life, to venture into the unknown. But even that is not enough. Jesus asks a third time, “Peter, do you really, really love me?” Are you willing, to give up your home, to give up fishing, to be persecuted for me, to never deny me again, no matter what the cost might be?

Jesus asks us the same question. “Do you love me?” We already know that Jesus loves us. He has proven his love through his passion and his resurrection. But do we love Jesus? Do we love him once, twice, or three times? I think most of us here would say that we love Jesus, at least once. That’s why we come to church. That’s why we call ourselves Christians. But loving Jesus once does not require us to give up our normal life. We can keep on fishing, or doing whatever it is we do, if we want. But Jesus keeps on asking us, “Do you love me twice, do you love me three times?” The question gets harder to answer.

The deeper we love Jesus, the deeper we will know how much he loves us. We know that through loving another, that we transcend ourselves, and that transcendence is something that we all crave. We know that loving another human being has its limits, that we cannot let go of ourselves completely, except for a few moments of self-forgetfulness, even our love for another can be manipulative and self-serving. Our love for others is often conditional, because we sense that the love we are given is conditional. But Christ’s love for us is unconditional, even as it was for Peter. And so we can be drawn into an ever greater and deeper love for Christ in which we can transcend ourselves.

How do we answer Jesus’ question? He tells us, as he told Peter, “If you love me, feed my sheep.” Perhaps the extent to which we feed his sheep, tells us whether we love Jesus once, twice, or three times. We can give a few dollars to some charity, provide a safety net for those in

need, but never really get involved in their personal lives. We might come to church out of a sense of duty. Or perhaps we can love twice, really getting involved and give some of our time and personal attention to organizations that provide some help. We might begin to have regular prayer time with God, to spend some time with the one we love. Or we might even love three times, dedicating our whole lives to following Jesus, holding nothing back, to becoming a saint, trying to be an example of forgiveness, and giving, and compassion. There are many ways to feed his sheep. For some, it may literally be feeding people who do not have enough food. For others it may be feeding the mind of those who don't know the wonders of God's creation by teaching them. It may mean mentoring those who grow up in an environment that does not value the development of good character. For still others it may be feeding the spirit by letting folks know that they are loved, and helping them to connect with the spirit of God through prayer and discussion about their spiritual life.

Have things returned to normal for us after Easter? I hope not, because we have encountered the resurrected Christ, and he has called us to a journey which is not normal in the eyes of the world. He invites us on his adventure. He invites us to be changed. We are to travel light on this journey. Christ asks us to give up our ambitions and our hatred, like he asked Paul. He asks us to give up fear and to love our enemies, like he asked Ananias. And he asks us to give up our old life and to love him and feed his sheep, like he asked Peter.

Jesus asks us three times, "Do you love me?" How will we answer him each time? Will we love him only once, or will we love him twice or even three times? However we love him now, Jesus calls us to love him even more.