

Chief of sinners though I be...

That hymn always brings back memories for me. It was a hymn that got used quite a bit in my college days, and not necessarily in Sunday worship or even in our daily chapel services at our synod's schools - Northwestern and then Martin Luther College. It actually got used quite a bit in the dorm. Now, don't get me wrong - we weren't gathering for random hymn sings between football practice and study time. That probably would have been a good idea, but we weren't that bright. We had another use for that.

You know how it is tough enough to talk to a friend about a sin they're getting stuck in now? With all the machismo of football playing friends and all the foolishness of those college years, I'd say it was even harder to broach that conversation in that stage in my life, even though we all understood how important it was. So we resorted to this hymn.

Whether it was just whistling the tune, humming it, or singing it out but changing the words to "Chief of sinners though I be, you have sinned much more than me"... for whatever reason - that became our back-door way to start a conversation, our attempt at humor to break the tension of a tough topic that needed to be talked about, a way to get past all the pride and walls we put up to talking about sin. It was our group's way of giving the reminder of what God's will is. And it was done out of love, so that we could share the joy of the real words: "Chief of sinners, though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me, died that I might live on high, lives that I might never die. As the branch is to the vine, I am his and he is mine!" Our goal was to reinforce and encourage, to remind that person of the power of Jesus and his resurrection for their lives.

Today, Jesus does that for us as he does that for his disciples. But he doesn't use a hymn (h-y-m-n) to do it. He uses Him, Himself. He displays again who he is and what that means for us.

On Easter, do you remember the word I said probably 50 times in the sermon? The thing that the angels said to do that changes everything? It took those women from despair to victory; it takes us from sulking to celebrating. Remember? *Remember*. Absolutely, on Easter we saw how remembering what God said and what he did changes how we view everything. Last week, the word of our Gospel Lesson was *Believe*. There we saw Thomas doubting, but then we saw how believing the solid, proven, absolute facts changes everything.

And you'd think that that should cover it for the Easter message, right? Remember His Word and believe it, right? Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! How many times can we say that before we can move on? I'll tell you this much, we haven't hit that number yet. I'd say that number would be pretty close to that sideways 8 (you know, the sign for infinity). Today we have to realize how often we need to be reminded of the truth and what that means. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.

That's what's happening in our text today. Jesus wants to show us his power again to make us realize what believing means for our lives. This, John tells us, is the third time he appears to his disciples after he rose from the dead. And through it, Jesus teaches us what John told Peter and Peter reacted to: (Verse 7) "**It is the Lord.**" A realization of that truly changes everything. **It is the LORD.**

The LORD - and here he's not just being polite and calling this guy on the beach "sir". That's pretty clear from Peter's reaction. This is the LORD. In the Old Testament - that would be the name that shows up in all caps, the one that can only refer to the God of faithful, full and promised grace. The Greek doesn't distinguish it linguistically, but Peter knew. And so do we when we see what happens here.

It is the LORD. Of course it is ... This guy on the shore that was too far away to be recognized in the mist ... This friendly man concerned about how their fishing trip was going - that one, is the LORD. He's showing himself again. And wow, did they need it!

Think about it. If the disciples had been like my friends in college, they would have had to wear out that tune we just sang on each other, calling each other, calling themselves to repentance - having fallen asleep on him in Gethsemane, having abandoned him at the betrayal, Peter denying him three times, Thomas doubting him, all of them - being scared and confused when he had clearly said what was happening. Chiefs of sinners, right?

That's the thing that makes this "third" appearance so important, and the 4th and the 5th, and on and on. Our sin doesn't seem to give up. Our sin doesn't seem to get tired by the 3rd repetition. No, instead, it just keeps gaining momentum, whether it is us returning to that sin and getting more and more comfortable because we've come up with a better and better list of excuses for it, or on the flip side, it is our guilt reminding us more and more of what we've done. Sin doesn't give up. We need Easter. We need Easter on way more than just Easter Sunday.

Think of what that means for those people that get interested in church just around Easter or Christmas? Two weeks ago, if you count both services, we had over 250 here worshipping, singing, declaring how important

Jesus is for us. And today – I mean, this is a great crowd – but are we saying this message isn't quite as important today? Or when you skip Bible Study, or your daily reading of the Word, does Easter not quite matter as much? That's what we're saying, but that is not the truth.

The sin that enters our eyes on the TV or in the movies trying to get us to think that promiscuity and vulgarity and dishonesty are kosher; the temptation that enters our ears through the music we hear hardening our consciences to figure that the sanctity of our speech doesn't matter, the peer pressure we feel from the world we live in, the impulses our sinful nature pulses through us – when's the last time *any* of those skipped a week, or even a day, even an hour?! And the more time we give them, the more they take over our lives until we forget what we were supposed to remember, we doubt what right now we so clearly believe. We live like he isn't the LORD. Let me tell you, in this spiritual battlefield of a world we live in; we **need** every Sunday of this Easter season. We **need** every appearance of our risen Savior; we need to see him again and again in his word. We **need** Easter every moment.

So yes, even a third time, on this Third Sunday of the Easter Season, Jesus comes to show us who he is and what that means. Look at what it means that “**He is the LORD.**”

So many things in this text: He shows how he cares about the everyday stuff, right? Look at verse 5. Here he is yelling from shore: “**Friends, haven't you caught any fish?**” How's your job going? What's happening in your life? The LORD cares.

And the LORD has direction for you: Verse 6: “**Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.**” As much as we may think we are in control of our success or failure of so much of our lives, this simple, foolish command (foolish to a human way of thinking) demonstrates that it is the LORD in control.

Sure, maybe Jesus doesn't appear at the side of your desk at work and tell you to check the spam folder and the recycle bin on your computer, where you'll find all the data you needed – but his Word is full of instruction for how you interact with everyone you work with and how you conduct yourself there.

And then there is that miracle, the catch of fish, big fish, miracle fish, 153 fish. Again, our success or failure is in the LORD's hands, so why not put all our efforts there too. He takes care of us.

And he shows that when they get to the shore too. There he is, cooking them breakfast, taking care of their bodies, but also, just by being there, taking care of their souls. This is the one they had fallen asleep on; this is the one they had abandoned; this is the one they had failed. This is the one who took all those sins to the cross and cried out “Father, forgive them.” And here he is, alive.

God did forgive them, and us – for all the times we picked sleep over our time remembering Easter, for all the times we abandon our Savior and live for this world, for all the times we've failed. This LORD took all of those sins and paid them in full.

So he makes this meal for the disciples to prove it and to demonstrate their fellowship, just like he is about to give us a meal of his own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. The LORD comes to us and proves to us who He is – the God of free and faithful love that keeps his promises.

And through that, he empowers us. Think of why John suddenly realized that this was the LORD. You think he was remembering another great catch of fish? Remember when, early on in his ministry, in Luke 5, Jesus borrowed a couple of fishermen's boats for a pulpit, and then after he got done, he told them to put their nets in in the middle of the day... so many fish the nets began to break and then Jesus told them: “**From now on you will catch men.**” And they did.

This is the LORD. Empowered by an understanding of what that means and what he does for you – you too will catch men. So do it. Have that conversation with those people you care about. Maybe you won't sing them a hymn verse, but you can share the message: **This is the LORD.**

Let's pray: Strengthen me, O gracious Lord,
By your Spirit and your word.
When my wayward heart would stray,
Keep me in the narrow way;
Grace in time of need supply
While I live and when I die. In Christ, Amen.