

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
Date: 4/10/16
Season: Easter 3
John 21:1-19

Weekend after next, six or seven men about my age will meet at a ramshackle fishing camp on the banks of the Little Alligator River deep in the great coastal plain of eastern North Carolina. This fishing camp is 20 miles from the nearest gas station and there's nothing much else around it. The Little Alligator is a broad tidal river, about 3 miles wide at that point, as it prepares to empty into Pamlico Sound, and the camp is surrounded by cypress trees growing on the bank and in the shallow water near the bank. If you know anything about bass fishing you would take one look at this camp and the Little Alligator and think that you had landed in bass heaven.

The camp belongs to an old college buddy of mine named Bill Pully who everyone simply calls "Pully." When we were in college I would often go out to Pully's camp to fish and talk and read and fish and talk and eat and fish, and, well, you get the picture. And, boy did we catch a lot of fish. I mean, we'd catch so many 4- and 5-pound bass the boat could barely hold all the fish we caught. It was unbelievable how many fish we caught. And boy, did our friends want to come to the Little Alligator and fish with us. And so Pully decided in the Spring of 1975 that he would host a fishing tournament at his camp on the Little Alligator. Now, the word "tournament" is a bit of a misnomer. Five or six of our friends came down for the weekend so it wasn't a big field. And first prize for catching the biggest fish was a case of really cheap beer. Second prize was two cases of that same beer. You get the picture.

Now what our friends learned as the weekend wore on is that Pully and I were liars. That's right. Like most honest-to-God fishermen, we were honest-to-God liars. The truth of the matter was that there just didn't seem to be a lot of bass in the Little Alligator River, even though it looked like the bassiest place you've ever seen. Oh there were plenty of mullet and alligator gar and even the occasional water moccasin. There just weren't a lot of large-mouth bass. But by the time our friends had gotten on to us, we were all having such a good time, laughing, telling stories, sharing dreams about girls and about the future – and yes, telling each other plenty of lies – that it didn't matter that there weren't many – or any – large-mouth bass jumping into the boats.

And so a tradition was born. Weekend after next, Pully and a lot of those original tournament participants will gather once again at Pully's fishing camp for the 42nd *Annual Little Alligator River Imagining We Are Fishing and Lying About Fishing Fishing Tournament*. Yes, every late April weekend for the last 42 years, without fail, Pully and

some collection of fellow liars have gone down to the Little Alligator to fish, to laugh, to swap stories, to fish, and just be in each other's company. I understand the fishing has actually gotten a little better; maybe it's because the fishermen have gotten a little craftier or a little smarter. At least that's what they tell me. I'm not sure I actually believe any of them. They are, after all, fishermen, and fishermen are natural born liars.

I haven't been down to the Little Alligator in years even though I always get an invitation right about now. My life has taken me far away from my beloved eastern North Carolina and it's just been too hard to get there. So, why, you might be asking yourself right about now, is Lex telling us his shaggy dog story about lying fishermen and a river none of us have seen, or are ever likely to see?

Well, here's why. Over the last few weeks, as my old fishing buddies have heard about this aggravating medical diagnosis I've received, every one of them has called or written to just check in. "Hey, how ya doin?" "You remember the time when...." (and I'm not going to tell you the rest). "Thinking of you." "Praying for you." And every single one of these guys, some of whom I haven't seen in years and years, said some version of the same thing. "I love you. Hang in there. I'm hanging with you. I love you."

The new Testament Greek word for "love," the kind of love my friends have been expressing for me, is *philia*, love between friends. It's the word we hear Peter use this morning when he encounters someone completely unexpected, who turns out to be the Risen Lord. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Yes, Lord, you know I "*philia*" you. Alone among the four gospels, John portrays Jesus as calling his disciples "friends." There is an intimacy in the relationship between Jesus and his friends that models the promise of intimacy that Jesus holds out for all of us who respond to him in love. And in John's gospel, it's all about love. In fact, in the whole gospel, Jesus only has one commandment for his friends. He tells them, "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this than to lay down one's life for one's friends." That's what Jesus' love looks like. Self-giving, self-sacrificing, complete surrender of your own agenda. Love that gives everything. Love that requires something. Love that's maybe hard. And so when Peter declares his love for Jesus, Jesus responds with something like, "Oh really? Then feed my sheep!" Love requires action. Love isn't just a warm feeling. Love and service, I think, are one and the same. One without the other is missing something.

Now fortunately these friends of Jesus weren't fishing on the Little Alligator that night. If they had been, I'm not so sure whether they would have caught 153 fish. But maybe I speak too quickly. After all, with Jesus all things are possible.

Just think back to the first of Jesus' miracles John reports. The one at the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee. You remember? The wine had run out. Shame and disaster for

the host was ahead. But Jesus blessed six large jars of water and when the chief steward tested them, he was astonished to discover that they contained wine. And not just any wine. No, this was the best wine. The best in the world.

That first miracle story was about the abundance of God's love poured out on the world in the person of Jesus. The abundance of God's grace poured out into the world.

And now this last appearance of Jesus—153 fish when there had been nothing. Fish in abundance. Now, there's an important detail here. Jesus invites Peter to **participate** in the abundance. Peter helps make the abundant catch of fish happen. Peter becomes agent of grace. So feed my sheep, says Jesus. If you love me, be an agent of bringing my love into the world. Actuate your love for me, Jesus tells Peter. And, by the way, tells us too. Way back in the first chapter of John's gospel, we are told that when The Word became flesh, when God came into the world in the person of Jesus, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."

So this is what grace looks like. A boatload of fish when you least expect it, just like the wine at Cana. When you've given up, when your hope is gone, when you don't know what in the hell you're doing, when your well has run dry, when you doubt that any of it is true – here comes grace. This is the Resurrection story we all need. Beyond the empty tomb, Jesus shows up on the shore and he invites us to share another meal just when we feel like we are about to starve to death. That's, after all, what friends do for friends.

It's sure what my old fishing buddies have done for me. They've incarnated Jesus' love. My friend, Page, wrote me the other day and said, "We'll be praying for you on 4/22. As for what we say about you at the Lying and Fishing Tournament, I ain't making any promises!"

Resurrection is all around us. The wine jars are full. The nets are overflowing with fish. Love and grace are in our midst. But it's up to us to participate. Like Peter, we have our own role to play. Peter had to put out the net and then haul in the catch. You have plenty of love and grace to offer, whether you know it or not. And if you'd like some of that for yourself, maybe a good place to start is by sharing what you have, even if it only feels like a little bit. Your nets are full of fish. And for once, that's a fishing story you can believe. Amen.