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Easter 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“You Don’t; He Does”

Text: John 21:1-19; Revelation 5:1-14; Acts 9:1-22

**Alleluia! Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] **Alleluia!**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, Thomas learned his lesson! He wasn’t going to miss again! He wasn’t there that first Easter night in the locked room with the others, but he wouldn’t make that mistake again. So when Peter says he going fishing, he’s there. In fact, he’s the first one mentioned after Peter. Maybe he was first in line. For as he learned, you never know when or where Jesus is going to show up . . .

But this story isn’t about Thomas, but Peter. Peter is the one Jesus would take aside and have a one-on-one with this day. By the Sea of Tiberius, which is another name for the Sea of Galilee. The same place where Jesus had first called Peter to be His disciple and told him he would now be catching men. But this day, after three years of following, after three years of learning, He has a question for Peter. ***Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?***

This is one of those questions that there is no right answer to. Like, *have you stopped kicking the dog?* Or, *have you stopped cheating on your taxes?* If you say yes, you admit that you had been doing that, but stopped. If you say no, you are saying you still are, that you haven’t stopped.

So what’s Peter supposed to say? Of course, he knows the answer is supposed to be yes. That teaching goes all the way back to Deuteronomy (6:5): *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* There is nothing we should love more than God. It’s the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods. Meaning, *we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.* So he knows he should say yes. He wants to say yes.

But he also knows that he kind of said that before, and well, you know what happened. It was not that many nights ago, in fact. Jesus said that the prophecy of Zechariah was now going to be fulfilled. That *I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered* (Zechariah 13:7). Peter boldly stated: *Even though they all fall away, I will not!* Jesus replied,

*Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.* To which Peter said: No way! *If I must die with you, I will not deny you* (Mark 14:27-31). And then . . . well, you know.

They say the sense of smell is one of the deepest memory triggers. The morning of our story here, Peter is sitting with Jesus beside a **charcoal fire** - the same as the fire in the courtyard of the High Priest (John 18:18), when Peter was asked if he was with Jesus, if he knew Jesus. Certainly, his denying was a stain on his conscience, something he would not soon forget, but then add to that the smell of the charcoal fire, flashing him back to the courtyard, back to his shame, back to his horrific failure . . . And then to hear that question: ***Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?***

He wants to say yes! But how can he? But he can't say no. Oh, what a jumbled, confused mess he is! So, ***Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*** But that's as far as he will go. No more bold claims. Like Thomas, he had learned his lesson, too. So, more than these? The others? More than these? These things of his trade, that he had gone back to this night? Not gonna go there. After Jesus asks the third time, a grieving Peter says: ***Lord, you know everything.*** You know what's in my heart. You know better than I do.

He loved Jesus. He did. He wanted to be with Jesus. He did. He meant what he had said before. He did. He just couldn't . . .

What about you? How would you answer Jesus question?

Like Peter, you know what your answer is supposed to be. But is it? Is it, in your life? How you live? What you do? How you set your schedule, your priorities? How you spend your time, your money? Do you love Jesus more than your family or spouse? Jesus had said that before, remember that? *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me* (Matthew 10:37). How about your work, your play, your sports? Your friends, your tech, your gadgets? Your sleep, your money, your plans, your goals? Name (fill in the blank), ***do you love me more than these?***

Welcome to Peter's world.

Maybe, like Thomas and Peter, you've learned your lesson. Maybe there was a day you would have boldly said yes! And you meant it. But then, life happens. Conflicts arise. Problems. Difficulties. Fears. They get the best of you. And you find yourself like Peter, between a rock and a hard place. And you don't do, you don't say, you don't follow through how you know you should. That's true for me at least. And I don't think I'm the only one . . .

Peter's not worthy. Neither are we. And yet Jesus does not send him packing, or back to

his fishing business. Doesn't cut him off. He is still in Jesus' plans. He is still an important part of Jesus' plans. ***Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep***, Jesus says to him. And do so not because you love me more than these. Because he didn't. He couldn't say that. Do so not because you are worthy. Because he wasn't. He knew that. **Do so because I forgive you.** Do so, because my lambs and sheep will not be able to answer that question correctly either! And they will need forgiveness, too. Just like you, Peter. Feed them, tend them, this way. Just as I am you. Forgive them.

For when it comes to worthy, there is only one. We heard of that in the reading from Revelation today, John's vision of heaven. There is a scroll, with writing on both sides, but ***no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it; . . . no one found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.*** And by the time John had this vision, Peter had already joined the company of heaven, had already been martyred. He was not worthy, even there, even then, even after being martyred for his faith. That did not make him worthy. There was nothing he could do to make himself worthy. There was only one, a lamb who had been slain but was alive again. A lamb whose His blood had ***ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation***, and brought them into the kingdom of God, as His priests.

He was worthy, because He loved His Father from eternity. He loved the Lord His God with all His hearts and soul and might while here on earth, in the flesh. He feared, loved, and trusted God above all things, even when it meant Him dying on a cross. And He loved you, His neighbor as Himself. Perfectly. Taking your place in death and giving you His place in life. Taking all your sin, your shame, your horrific failure on Himself, to set you free. To ransom you. That you be forgiven. And you are. Just as Peter. And so you are worthy not because of anything you do; you are worthy because of everything Jesus did. *For you.*

Just like at the Sea of Galilee - both times. They didn't get those large catches of fish because they were such good fishermen. Because they weren't! Both times they fished all night and caught nothing. They got those large catches of fish because of what Jesus did. At His Word.

And at His Word He provides all you need. His Word with the water of baptism that washes you clean and gives you new birth. His Word which absolves you. The preaching of His Word, His Gospel. And His Word which makes mere bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lamb to feed you. His Word which makes sinners into saints, fishermen into disciples, even enemies into missionaries.

For like as with Peter, He still has plans for you. Even if you've been someone like Saul. Saul the great persecutor of the church. Saul, the enemy of Jesus. At His Word, Saul is changed, and Jesus will use him for great things. Just like Peter. And just like you. You may not think so. You may not think what you do, or what you will *ever* do, is so great.

But Jesus judges great differently than the world. And while the world may think you quite ordinary, to Jesus you are not. To be great in His eyes is simply to be His child, to receive from Him and look to Him for all you need. And what you receive from Him, you'll give. His love, His forgiveness. To those people He gives to you.

That is what Peter would now do. That would be his confession. That is how he would tend and feed Jesus' lambs and sheep. He would teach them of the Lamb who was slain, and give them that Lamb. Give them His Word, His forgiveness, His Body and Blood. He would tell them how Jesus did that for him, and for them, too. And He'll use you to provide for others as well. Not the same as Peter, but in your own way. Where He puts you. For the people He gives to you.

And if anyone asks you: Name (fill in the blank), ***do you love Jesus more than these?*** You can - not proudly, but truthfully - confess: no, I do not. I can not. But *Jesus* loves me more than these. And that's what matters. That's the answer. Not me, but Him. Not what I do, but what He has done, and is still doing, for me. What He did for me long before I ever came along. His death, His resurrection, His forgiveness, His life. He did it all, and gives it all to me. And you, too.

For **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] **Alleluia!**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.