

“From One End to the Other”
St. John, Apostle and Evangelist
John 21:20-25

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Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

The ecumenical clergy group of west county St. Louis met at the Assembly of God church one Thursday morning. Our friend John Wilson, the senior pastor, took us on a tour of their new building. He led us into the nursery. One wall of the nursery was outfitted with built-in cribs, one stacked upon the other. With their sliding bars they looked like so-many miniature jail cells for miniature inmates. The opposite wall was empty. A fellow Lutheran, Arden Mead, said, “1 Corinthians 15:51 would be a perfect verse to inscribe on that blank wall.” We looked at each other, waiting to see if anyone could call that verse from memory. John Wilson picked up a Bible, turned to the passage and started to laugh. “What does it say? Read it to us.” “Here it is,” he said, “Behold, I show you a mystery: we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.”

That is a memory I have carried around for thirty years. I have pictured the verse on the walls of nurseries. Sometimes when I walk through the halls of skilled nursing facilities I am struck by the similarities between the needs of those little ones in the nursery and those older ones in the nursing home. The verse would not work, however, in the facility that accommodates us at the other end of our lives. There we shall all sleep and we shall all be changed.

The gospel reading today takes us from one end to the other. We heard the beginning of John's gospel on Christmas Day. Today we hear from John's final chapter. The gospel reading takes us from the beginning of the incarnation to Jesus' final appearance with his disciples. In the course of two short days we move from the beginning of life to its end. From the fourth century the church set aside three days after Christmas to do just that. December 26 is for St. Stephen, deacon and martyr. He was stoned to death by a mob. December 27 is for St. John, apostle and evangelist (meaning gospel writer). Tradition names him the only apostle to die of old age. On December 28 we hear the story of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, the children whom Herod

put to death in an effort to kill Jesus. Lest we get sentimental about the birth of Jesus these commemorations drag us into the sorry world to which Jesus came as light and life.

“What about us?” is the question that arises from this quick journey from one end to the other. At the beginning of chapter 21 we find the disciples at loose ends. “What do we do now?” they asked one another. “I’m going fishing,” said Peter, “back to the old life.” That is not what Jesus had in store for him. In the verses right before today’s text, Jesus told Peter what will become of him. Jesus said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” Now, that verse is the perfect one to inscribe on the nursing home wall, “...someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” Jesus had something even graver in mind. “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God,” with his hands also outstretched on a cross. After telling him this, Jesus said to Peter, “Follow me.”

“Peter turned and saw the disciple Jesus loved.” Peter asked, “What about him?” Jesus said, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” Do you get the feeling there was a bit of rivalry between Peter and the Beloved Disciple, most likely John. They were competitors in the foot race to the tomb on Easter Sunday. According to John’s gospel, he, John, got there first and had caught his breath by the time Peter came huffing along. John even had the good manners to let the old gent go into the tomb first. Or, was John afraid to go in? Or, was he deferring to Peter’s leadership? John’s gospel identifies the beloved disciple not in so many words. But a person does not have to read far to know the beloved disciple is none other than John. The other gospel writers do not remember it quite that way. Many think there was a rivalry between their congregations in that first century.

I can tell you about a rivalry between St. John and St. Peter Lutheran Churches. They were part of the coed softball league I signed our church up for back in St. Louis. When we played St. Peter the game ended early because of the slaughter rule. I think they had us 20-0 by the fourth inning. Our at-bats were over one, two, and three. Their at-bats went on forever. Then we played St. John. They repeatedly stole home in the time it took our catcher to throw the ball to our pitcher. We were clearly out of our league. When St. Peter and St. Paul played each other the rivalry was fierce. The senior pastor pointed out to me, “The other churches in this league all have grade schools serving as farm teams for them. We don’t. Many of these folks have been playing against each other since they were in sixth grade. Their rivalries have grown over the years. Also, most of the players on each team have been teammates since grade school. That is one reason they are so good.” We withdrew from this league and formed an ecumenical, coed softball league with West County churches. That’s how I got to be friends with John Wilson. We could beat the Assemblies of God.

The rivalry between the congregations founded by Peter and John was not based in sports competition, but in the persons of Peter and John. What was there about these two persons? Peter was the founding pastor. So, there was that. What he is best known for however, is that Jesus took him back. He was not perfect. He blew it big time. There is a rooster carved into the paneling up here and sewn into the needlepoint cushions at the altar rail to remind us. Peter bragged to Jesus, “I will never leave you.” Jesus replied, “Before the cock crows you will have denied me three times.” And he did. He followed at a distance after the soldiers and temple police came with torches and weapons to arrest Jesus. They brought him to the palace of the high priest. Peter went to the courtyard where a servant girl spotted him as a Galilean like Jesus. She said, “I swear I saw you with him.” Peter cursed and swore, “I don’t even know the man.” Three times he did that and then he heard the cock crow. He went out and wept bitterly. At the end of the gospel, in chapter 21 in fact, after Jesus called them in from fishing Jesus asked Peter, “Do

you love me?” Three times he asked him just like three times Peter denied him. Three times Peter said, “Lord, you know that I do.” Three times Jesus replied with some variation of “Follow me.” Peter’s became the church for those who needed to be taken back. There were plenty of those in late 1st century and plenty more of us in early 21st century. In Peter’s congregation those who need to be taken back hear Jesus say “Follow me.”

John also was a founding pastor. His was the church of abiding love and the abundant life. Back in the late 1960s when strange things were happening everywhere, St. John Lutheran Church in Miami, FL changed its name to St. Love. They had a wonderful community outreach among some groups of people no one cared about. St. Love produced even gray-haired men and women who threw their fists into the air, declaring, “Power to the people. Peace and love.” That was John’s Church of the Beloved Disciples – bell bottoms, head bands and love beads. And then John died. People assumed John would live to see Jesus return. After all, Jesus said to Peter, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” But John died. His death pulled the faith foundation right out from under folks. Death has a way of doing that. “What about us? What do we do now?” It is not unusual for us to attach ourselves to a person or even to bits of information as we try to secure the future. It feels like that tent is about to blow away. We have to tie it down. Jesus spoke to those first century folk through the words of scripture just as he speaks to us. “What is that to you,” He says. “Trust me. I am the one who has pioneered the way through death to life. Follow me. I was there at the beginning of your life. I’ll be there at the end of it and at all times in between. Follow me.”