

Breakfast at the Last Chance Café
3rd Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2010
John 21; Acts 9

Last week it was Thomas, the doubter. On Easter, it was Peter, John and several scarcely-believed women. Easter evening it was 2 dejected disciples trudging back from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Today, it's several disciples who are clearly "at loose ends" - including Peter; and it's Saul, soon to be called Paul; and a couple of other unlikely disciples in Damascus.

Not exactly a hit parade of the rich, famous, and successful, is it. And *these* guys are the building blocks of Christ's church. Is it any wonder there's a legend where God tells the angels how he's going to accomplish the salvation of world; when the Lord points to this motley crew of disciples, one angel blurts out, "So what's your Plan B?!" To which God replies, "There *is* no Plan B."

The Marines may be looking for a few good folks; but Jesus has no such scruples. After he's gone to hell and back to defeat the powers of sin, death and the devil, don't you think he'd either stick around for a few millennia to consolidate his achievements, or at least provide a Master Class in Advanced Discipleship and Mission Development?

Instead, here's Thomas, Mr. Skeptic. Here's Peter, Mr. Deny Three Times. Here are James and John, AKA the Sons of Thunder.

Here are the other disciples, Those Who Fled To Save Their Skins. Here are Cleopas and his dejected companion. Here are a few women - like, who'd listen to them. Here's Saul, a devout persecutor of the fledgling Church. Here's the unfortunately-named Judas, who has to take said persecutor into his own house. And here's Ananias, charged with being spiritual counselor, healer, and baptizer of said persecutor. I can hear angels muttering, "Sure hope God knows what he's doing."

I gave this sermon a title long before I had fleshed out what exactly I was going to say in it. I call it "Breakfast at the Last Chance Café." The post-Easter theme seems to be that the very people who have screwed up, sinned, strayed, gotten it all bass-ackwards, and otherwise made a hash of things are given another chance - really, the last and best chance - by Christ. And most of the time, that chance comes with a meal. In today's Gospel, it's served over breakfast.

Peter, of course, had already seen the risen Lord at least twice; we heard about that last week. But there was still something that stood between him and Jesus; something that hadn't been discussed in those two encounters in the upper room. There, Jesus was addressing the basic unbelief of all the disciples. You'll remember that in Luke's Gospel, Jesus even asks for some food to eat, so that he could prove he was no ghost. You'll also remember that the disbelief of Cleopas and his friend was also addressed at table, when Jesus broke, blessed and

shared bread with them. In those encounters, all the disciples present began to wrap their minds around the reality of Jesus' resurrection; and Jesus began to disclose their future to them: they were to enact the forgiveness and retention of sins, empowered by the Holy Spirit, as the continuation of Jesus' mission as given by his Father.

But Peter - the same Simon nicknamed "Rocky" by Jesus, because of his solid-rock confession of faith midway through Jesus' earthly ministry - yup, that same Peter had become sinking sand when Jesus was on trial for his life. Peter had denied even knowing Jesus - not once but 3 times. Deny me once, shame on me; deny me twice, shame on you; deny me three times... is there enough shame or blame for such deliberate and persistent sin?

Simon - note, not Peter, Rocky, but Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Three times, Jesus asks. Three times Peter answers; "Yes, Lord; Yes, I love you. You know all things; you know I love you." And three times, Jesus gives him a new command. "Feed my sheep; tend my lambs; feed my sheep."

Only when the stumbling-block of *Simon's* sinfulness, his denial, had been removed by Jesus, could he truly be *Peter*, the Rock of faith. Only when Jesus' forgiveness was extended - by means of a command to do mission, no less - could he take up his cross and follow Jesus.

Only when Jesus had triple-stitched *Simon's* thrice-ripped faith, could he confidently send *Peter* into a torn, broken, faithless, sinful and death-shadowed world, and use him to accomplish God's Plan A. Only over breakfast at the Last Chance Café could Peter rise up, a new man.

It's not too different for The Apostle Formerly Known As Saul. Oh, he didn't deny Jesus. He *persecuted* Jesus by persecuting those who followed him. Saul wasn't faithless or immoral; he was, by his own admission, "as to the Law, blameless." But as to the truth of God's Plan A of Salvation, Saul was all wet. He observed all the rules of the road - but was headed the wrong way down a one-way street. After Jesus knocked him off his high horse, he sent Saul to a *new* street - ironically, the Street Called Straight.

And Jesus sent him to the house of a man named *Judas!* How's that for irony in naming! There blind Saul fasted and prayed for three days. How's that for the right number of days?! And the man who comes to him is a disciple named Ananias. So what, you might say. Well, a few chapters later in Acts, there will be the story of another Ananias, and his wife Sapphira, who live in Jerusalem; they make a show of selling their property and laying it at Peter's feet for the good of the fledgling Church. But they've held something back for themselves, then lied about it; and Peter - yes, the very same Peter who Jesus restored - catches them in their unrepentant sin, and both are struck

dead. Yikes. But here, a different Ananias swallows his misgivings and fears concerning a *repentant* persecutor of the Church; he heals and baptizes Saul; and even calls him "brother." Then Paul rises - and eats. Breakfast at the Last Chance Café happens wherever a repentant sinner is forgiven.

You know how on Dragnet they said that some of the names were changed to protect the innocent? It seems in the New Testament, the names are changed to transform the guilty, as long as they eat with Jesus at the Last Chance Café. Saul becomes Paul. A good Ananias stands in for a bad; ditto for Judas. Simon, son of John is lifted up once and for all as Peter. Faithless disciples become faithful apostles. Unreliable women become "apostles to the apostles." Dejected travelers become heralds of the greatest good news the world has ever seen. Sinners become... forgiven sinners, also known as saints.

And here we sit, ready for the Bread of Life to be served up once more in the Last Chance Café. We're a pretty motley crew ourselves. God alone knows what frailties and fears; what sins and shortcomings; what doubts, misgivings, shames and blames burden our hearts and cast dark shadows on our names. Yet Jesus - crucified, risen and glorified - comes to each of us; looks each of us in the eye; calls each of us by our sin-smearred name. "Saul, why do you persecute me? Simon, do you love me? Cathy, are you listening?" Fill in your own name; and don't be

afraid. It's just the divine Maitre d' calling us, to seat us at table in his Last Chance Café and feed us with his very own recipe for the Bread of Life and the Wine of Salvation.

Thankfully this Last Chance Café is open for business until the last day of the world. No one who is hungry to repent, no one who thirsts for forgiveness, and no one who really wants that blessed Last Chance, ever will be turned away. Everyone who comes; everyone who is willing to try the down-home cooking of Jesus, will be satisfied, justified, and sent home with way more than a doggie bag. You'll go home with your "real name" - "Friend and brother or sister of Jesus." You'll go home with his forgiving love, wise counsel, radiant holiness, and eternal life welling up within you. You'll go home with a job offer - to work in the Last Chance Café, feeding lost and hungry sheep - er, patrons - with salvation that will stick to their ribs; with forgiveness that's good for what ails them; with compassion that's more healing and nourishing than Grandma's best chicken soup; and with the promise of a seat at God's table and a job in his café forever. What goes around comes around, after all. And what comes here is nothing less than everything God has to offer us, free for the asking. There's never a charge, after all, at the Last Chance Café. Jesus picked up the tab. Amen.