

The 2nd Sunday of Easter: Holy Trinity Church: April 23, 2016

John 20: 19-31: *Take the Pearl*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, you add the right attitude to the right aptitude and you have a winner, every time. But here is the big question,

where do you get that right attitude? John the Evangelist wrote in the last verse of the 20th chapter of his gospel the following, “*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.*

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

“*You may have life in His name.*” That is the secret of life: believing that Jesus is the Christ: Believing that Jesus is Lord and Savior of this world, believing that Jesus can give you victory over every circumstance, over every adversity, over every bit of pain, over every bit of suffering, over every bit of trouble you may endure. So, here is another big question, how does faith in Jesus the

Christ give us such victories? Throughout my life I have often heard this little ditty. We are born. We suffer and then we die. That's life. It sounds to me like the land of the living dead. It sounds to me more like, "I quit." Is that all there is? Is that what we are all about Alfie? I say absolutely NOT! I say that because Jesus can turn our pain, our suffering, our adversities and our troubles into a pearl.

I see life's hardships beautifully illustrated by a story I learned many years ago. It is the story of the oyster whose shell was invaded by a tiny grain of sand. By some strange circumstance, this tiny piece of quartz entered into the shell of the oyster and there, like an alien thing, like a pathogen, like an intruder, like a cruel, unfeeling catastrophe, it causes pain, distress, and presents a very real problem for the oyster. What shall the oyster do? There is no point in trying to deny the reality that tortures every nerve, so the oyster doesn't try. In spite of the denial, nothing can change the fact that the grain of sand is there. Nor would grumbling or rebelling do any good, for after all the protests and complaints, the grain of sand would still be there. No, the oyster recognizes the intruder's presence, and right away begins to do something. Slowly and patiently, with infinite care, the oyster builds upon the grain of sand, layer upon layer of a plastic, milky substance that covers each sharp corner and coats every cutting edge of the grain of sand, and gradually,

slowly, a pearl is made. A thing of wondrous beauty wrapped around trouble, wrapped around pain, wrapped around suffering. The oyster has learned, by God's will, to turn grains of sand into pearls, cruel misfortunes into blessings, pain and distress into beauty, trouble and adversity into strength.

Yes, my sisters and brothers in Christ, Jesus can take our lives and help us turn our pain, our suffering, our adversity our troubles into a beautiful pearl. But that's not all. Jesus can also, turn your problems into possibilities. Far too often we see only the problems and we neglect to look for the great problem solver who is right there with us! Nothing is beyond God. Nothing is impossible with God and yet we tend to focus more on the problem at hand than the God who is always with us. We forget this great God who led our Jewish sisters and brothers out of Egypt and through the desert; this great God who stood with the children of Israel with a pillar of fire before them to lead them and a pillar of fire to protect them from behind. This loving and great God still stands with us as a pillar of fire leading and protecting. This God who tells us we can do anything. This God, our God who give us victory over sin through the sacrifice of Jesus the Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. This same God will take all of your pain and suffering and adversity and trouble and will make your soul a pearl of great beauty.

Yes, God can help us turn our pain into a pearl. God can help us turn our problems into possibilities. God can take our failures and turn them into stepping-stones for the future because that is what the cross and the empty tomb of His Son are all about. The disciples knew that the resurrection that really mattered took place not only in the garden that first Easter morning, but also in their own broken hearts. We see Thomas with his doubt and Peter with his denial and Judas with his suicide. They failed. They were afraid. They had forsaken Him when He needed them most. The disciples are us. But God will not allow you and me to remain failures and to remain in fear. Jesus came to His disciples and began a reconstruction project in their hearts and minds and in their Holy Spirits. Out of the ash heap of their failures and fears came the most dynamic group of men and women the world has ever known. God can do that with your life as well. Sure, all of us have had our share of failures and disappointments. Everybody who has ever lived and tried to accomplish anything worthwhile in this life knows what it is like to fail.

In 1985, I packed up my room at St. John's Seminary in Brighton, MA. I left before ordination to the diaconate because I wanted to marry and have children. I found the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church to be a very lonely place. It was a good decision for me. I went home and went to work in my father's medical clinical laboratory. I married and had three children.

Work in the laboratory went against the grain of my soul. For me, working in the lab was like the grain of sand inside the oyster. It was abrasive and painful and I knew I did not belong there because God kept calling me to the priesthood. The call was always there hovering in the back of my mind and in the yearning of my soul and it never went away. Then came the loss of Carol and I was left with three very sad children. I was angry and bitter with God. Then, one Saturday morning I was out early walking in the woods. The call was heavy on me that morning. Fortunately, I was in the woods near my home, when I told God to get off my back in much sharper language that is absolutely unrepeatable from the pulpit. I cried out to God in my pain, "How much more do you want to punish me for not becoming a priest?" How can I ever become a priest? I have 3 children. Get off my back. Give me peace. Find someone else. Leave me alone." And then everything changed. I went home and found Maria Casmiro Smith sitting at my kitchen table. We sat down and had coffee, and she said to me, "John, you need to go back to school." I said, "Maria, I am done with school." No, John, you need to go back to school and become a priest in my church, in the Episcopal Church." From out of a place deep inside me, I heard this voice not my own immediately say, "You know what Maria, you're right. I do need to become a priest in the Episcopal Church." Maria said, "Good, you are coming to my church tomorrow. Chip

and I will meet you at 9:45 AM in Grace Church on Mathewson Street and we will introduce you to Fr. Bob Brooks, the rector, and then you go from there, John!” That was 12 years ago and as they say the rest is history. In that moment, God spoke to me through Maria. In that moment God changed my life forever. In that moment, it was like the scales falling from the eyes of Paul. It didn’t mean there would be no more adversity. In fact, there was more. It didn’t mean my life suddenly became easy street as I continued to work in the lab and take classes commuting to the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge MA. from my home in Cranston. I still had my children who needed their father. The ordination process was not always sweetness and light along the way. I was told right to my face, “No church wants a 60 year old man with no experience.” But none of it mattered to me anymore. I knew come hell or high water, I was going to become a priest. None of the pain, none of the many obstacles of the ordination process that I had to overcome, none of it mattered anymore because everything changed. My attitude changed completely. Joy entered and light shined into a heart darkened for years with great loss and death because now God had shown me a way when I believed there was no way. Anger and anxiety were replaced with a calm assurance that all would be well. Peace and joy came in and never left and then finally, God gave me one of the greatest joys in my life. On October 18,

2011 on the Feast of St. Luke, God gave me the pearl of great value. God gave me the gift of the priesthood and then God blessed me with another pearl of great value. Two months after Ordination to the priesthood, God gave me the great gift of Holy Trinity Church.

My brothers and sisters, if we just give ourselves to God, then God can turn our problems into possibilities. If we just give ourselves to God we can turn our failures and fears into victory. If we just give ourselves to God we can take our pain and suffering and adversities and troubles and turn our lives into beauty. If we just give ourselves to God our attitudes can be changed for the better. Here is the key, if we give yourselves to God we must stay the course. That is always the real challenge and that is the key to our relationship with God because God's time, the *Kairos*, is completely different from our time, the *Chronos*.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, our lives are like the oyster and the grain of sand that comes into it. Throughout our lives, God's hand remains wide open to us. All we have to do is reach in and take the pearl. Amen.