

John 21:1-19

“How Big is God?”

The meaning of my name, Anne, is grace, or full of grace. I've always thought this was kind of a bad pun: I'm clumsy much of the time, which would seem to be graceless more so than graceful. And I'm not inclined to be particularly gracious to myself for moments when I lack grace...which means I don't often look for others to be gracious to me. But several times in my life I have had an encounter with the grace of God and loving folks, grace I myself did not merit on my own. Holy Week was one of those times.

That's the week I hurt my back and lived on the couch. It's also the week many people called, sent cards, and came by the house to see how I was faring. Now, I started that time on the couch worrying about how I was going to do what I had planned for the week. I knew the answer: Eric would handle the church, Ben would handle the house and meals and pets, Fran would teach the Bible study...but my vision that week was kind of narrow. My world shrunk to the size of my living room, and I wasn't looking for grace in the midst of it all. But my eyes were opened and my vision expanded as the phone rang, and the mail came, and grace was offered to Ben and to me as my wonderful neighbors brought over soup and chicken salad, friends

brought muffins and cakes and all manner of food, even an entire Easter feast. One wonderful soul came by to see if he could mow the lawn for us. These gracious people expressed their love, and God's, in caring for us, and in so doing, my world, and my sense of God's presence, expanded back beyond the walls of my living room—God's love and presence and power became bigger to me, even in my pain.

Today's story makes me wonder how big God's love, and the power of the Resurrection was, to Peter. We don't hear from Peter from the crucifixion until today's story. He goes to the tomb, but says nothing. Jesus had appeared twice after the Resurrection to the gathered disciples, and brash, bold, impulsive Peter had nothing to say. John does not record for us the expression on Peter's face when Jesus showed up in the room where they hid. The gospel doesn't tell us if he hid behind someone else, or if his face showed fear, or joy, or shame. We don't know what it was like for Peter, who had three times denied Christ, but we know that after some time had passed, he and several other of the disciples returned to the life Peter had before Jesus called him from fish to men: he went back to the sea, to a life he had once left but never betrayed.

Jesus finds Peter again, this time by the Sea of Tiberius, where he and six others have gone fishing. After a fruitless night, Jesus suggests a new approach, and the fishermen meet with great success, Jesus gives them breakfast, and gives Peter a new commission to serve God's people.

But is it so easy for Peter? Let's watch him a minute. When the disciples realize that the man calling to them from the shore is Jesus, Peter jumps in the water. My Sunday school teachers taught me that Peter was running to Jesus...but I don't think we know that. Peter jumps out of the boat but we don't hear that he's come to shore until the whole boatload of men comes to shore. I think maybe Peter's feeling a little shy, a little scared, and a lot like someone who expects to receive very little grace from one whom he has offended...like someone whose vision of God and love and grace is a little too small, whose world has become too small to deal with the greatness of God and the miracle of the Resurrection, who can't see how Jesus can be alive again, when Peter had seen him crucified. Peter's world must have crashed in on itself on that day...just as it is changed again, there by the Sea of Tiberius.

The world changed for us this week, too. It didn't just change at Virginia Tech but in Houston and Iraq and Sudan and right here in Beaufort. It changed for us all. Life happened this week, and some weeks life happens to be pretty great and some weeks it turns out okay and other weeks, let's face it, wind up being pretty lousy. For me, and for many, this was one of those lousy weeks. As the news unfolded on Monday, I watched and grieved for lost lives in Blacksburg and for a world that watched in shock and horror.

It feels like the world ought to stop for events like what happened at Virginia Tech, but it doesn't. A look at the news shows that the stock market goes on, the war in Iraq goes on, a volcano erupted in Columbia, someone was eliminated from American Idol. People lived and died. We sleep, eat, work, talk and life goes on. Somehow, we go on.

Peter must have thought, too, that it was time for life to go on again. He must have somehow thought that making his world small again, going back to the safety and livelihood he had once known as a fisherman, might make him feel again safe and secure, that finding comfort in familiarity might help him be comfortable with himself again, might come to feel a little less like Jesus' betrayer and a little

more like an ordinary guy. But the power of God and the message of love and redemption in Jesus Christ is bigger than that...Peter tried to hide his head in the sand, metaphorically speaking, there by the sea of Tiberius. He wanted his world, his God, the demands on him to be manageably small...but Jesus' love was bigger than Peter's understanding, and he just wouldn't let Peter off the hook. And so Jesus asked, "Peter, do you love me?"

In asking the question, "Do you love me?" Jesus asks Peter and us if we love God enough to see God past the tragedies that veil our eyes with tears and break our hearts. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" and in the words calls us to look not only past the cross to the Resurrection but past our own betrayal to grace and redemption. The question, "Do you love me?" asks what Easter, and resurrection, and Messiah mean in a world that lives by the cross and calls us to see that Easter changes everything. It asks us to see with the clarity of the Holy Spirit that nothing, nothing can separate us from God: not illness, not evil, not time nor space nor carelessness nor malice nor neglect, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not bombs, or planes, or wars, or guns, or famine, or global warning. No act of will, no accident, can separate us from the love of God. Not even a

three-times repeated, compounded, shameful and shame-faced betrayal by Peter can separate Peter from the love of God. God is bigger than you think. And so we can't hide...from God or from what goes on around us.

Our faith demands that we engage in the world...we cannot simply go about our own business, but we must be a part of what goes on in the world, good and bad. So we respond to this last week with sadness for the families of the Virginia Tech murder victims, for the others whose names will escape our notice because they've been crowded out by something more sensational, for the victims of terror and war all over the world, for those who die from hunger and AIDS and cancer and old age. And we should respond with joy, because we do have a resurrection faith that proclaims boldly that we must not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.

A pastor taught me years ago his formula for preaching funeral sermons. They all started with "Our Christian faith is made for times such as these, when we come together in our grief to celebrate a life of faith." They all celebrated the successes and good qualities of the deceased, and ended with the affirmation that he or she had "fought the fight, run the race, kept the faith." That was pretty much it. I hope

the funerals this week have better sermons, but I also hope they acknowledge the terrible tension of the Christian faith: God existed for Peter when he denied Jesus, even as Jesus was tried and tortured. God exists in this place and time where lives can be snuffed out at random. The resurrection does not exempt us from fear, pain, and danger, but rather the Spirit of God accompanies us in our fear, pain, and danger, and redeems our suffering with eternal life.

I suspect this comes as paltry comfort to those who have lost loved ones this week. I wish I had something better to say, but the fault is in my words and ability to express the goodness of God, and not in God's guilt, vengeance, or absence. What makes sense out of the evils of this week and of this world is not that God did it, that God is mad at us, or that God is simply not there when we need him. Instead, we can find meaning as we live together in grief and bewilderment, knowing that God is present, and bigger than our pain, fear, and doubt, and as we struggle to understand what that means for us.

We can't live with our heads in the sand, hiding away in little protective enclaves, trying to keep the world from hurting us. Turning off the news or saying, "thank God it wasn't me or mine" is selfish and

short-sighted. Instead the Christian community must come together and support one another, and find that we can be our truest and best and closest to God when we love each other in the hard times.

It's no kind of love that's not there in the rawest of times and places or in the sweetest and best of days. And it is love we are called to offer: the love and mercy of God, the hard love that we live because we believe it even when we can't feel it, because God loves through us when we can't love on our own.

That's our goodness: that God's at God's best even and perhaps especially when we aren't our best, and when we are. When we are weak, God is strong. And when we are strong, God is strong. And it is God's strength, God's presence, God's mercy and grace we must rely on when the world seems to turn against us. It is to heaven, and the unending presence of God, that we turn always and in all things to answer our questions and share our tears and our laughter.

Although I can't explain it, somehow God is affirmed, not challenged, when the worst happens. That's when we should come together and put hands and feet and hearts and voices and presence into sharing God's presence with those who suffer. And because we share in the suffering, we share too in the healing, and the mercy and

grace of God takes our joy and pain and produces redemption and resurrection. Our God is big enough for that.

I believe the Virginia Tech community began to see resurrection in the life-giving love of students and professors who risked themselves for others. I think Nikki Giovanni preached resurrection when she rallied the community around the words, "We are Virginia Tech." And when the strains of "Amazing Grace" were shouted down by cries of "Hokies, Hokies," a community was resurrected in love for one another and a common determination to live and not die, to love and not surrender to grief and recrimination, to go on as a testament to life and faith and the goodness of God. The Hokies are modeling for us a world view that expands beyond ourselves, encompasses what they have suffered, and looks forward in hope to who they are and will be. This is what Christian community can be, and God is big enough to be with us in our suffering and in our joy.

This is the word of grace we have to offer Darfur and Baghdad and the people who are hurting just down the block: we are here, because God is here. We love you, because God loves you and us. We will share our lives with you, and together we will see resurrection, grace and love that conquers evil, are greater than sin,

and replaces death with life and hope and peace. We are the people of God, the followers of Christ, accompanied by the Holy Spirit. We live in this world, we love in this world, and we demonstrate the presence of God in this world. We are the people of God, and God's love will prevail. We are the people of God, and our God is bigger than death, bigger than fear, bigger than our questions. With Peter we answer, Lord, we love you, and hear in reply: tend my lambs. May we have the vision to see with God's sight, to love with God's heart, to serve with God's grace, and to know that of all the things we can think and do and know and experience in this world, God is bigger, and God is with us. Amen.