

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
April 18, 2010
John 21:1-19

We were on a family vacation, staying at a cottage that belonged to some of Marshall's relatives on Kelly's Island in Lake Erie, on the day that the kids played their very first game of miniature golf. Mary was two years old and Kendall was four. That seemed to me a little on the early side for learning to play miniature golf, but I figured they were both bright kids and would catch on quickly. I explained to the kids that the goal of the game was to get the golf ball into the hole, showed them where the golf ball should start, and showed them how to swing the putter so nobody got hurt. Kendall went first. She put her ball down where it belonged, and used her putter properly to hit it a few feet forward. And then she walked up to her ball, picked it up, walked over to the hole, placed the ball inside the hole, and walked on to the next hole. She did not understand why I was laughing.

As it turns out, the real goal of playing miniature golf is being together; the true goal of playing miniature golf is relationships, and the physical goal of getting a ball into a hole turns out to be a way to get to the true goal, the relationships.

It is like dating: we go out for dinner not because the goal is food consumption, but because a shared meal is a way to fall in love.

There are some scholars who think that it doesn't make much sense to have the events in today's gospel reading happening after the resurrection, and so they think maybe this narrative actually belongs during the lifetime of Jesus. In some ways it seems odd for Christ to say "Follow me" after the resurrection; for Jesus to tell the disciples "Follow me" during the time he was traveling around preaching and teaching seems like it would be more logical. But what seems at first like an irregularity in the text often turns out to be exactly the point of the text.

During his lifetime, Jesus told his disciples what the physical goal was: follow me. They left their fishing boats and their tax collecting offices and followed him as he traveled and taught. But it is now, after the resurrection, that it becomes clear that the physical following is not the true goal; the true goal is the relationship.

In the sentence right before today's reading, John tells us very directly what the purpose of his writing is. Although his writing has some similarities to a biography of an admirable person, John tells us that his purpose is different: "These things 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" (John 20:31).

The narrative in today's gospel reading emphasizes that ultimately the words "Follow me" are words that Jesus is speaking to each of us. When it is the Risen Christ who says, "Follow me" to the disciples, it becomes apparent that physically following him is not the real goal; his body isn't going to stay around long enough to be followed around physically. The true goal is relationship: the risen Christ is inviting the disciples into relationship with him. And since he is no longer limited to a human lifespan, the Risen Christ is also inviting us into relationship with him.

This emphasis on personal relationship is central to Christianity. Jesus tells us that the most important laws are to love God and to love our neighbors. The true goal is relationship. The true goal is love.

Last Wednesday I went to the Region 2 ECW meeting at St. Mary's, Whitechapel. It was the day I walked a labyrinth for the very first time. I had always thought that the goal of walking was to get to somewhere else. But in a labyrinth you don't end up in a different place. In a labyrinth, the end point is the same as the beginning; the place stays the same, and it is the person who becomes different. I will admit that the experience of walking the labyrinth was a bit disconcerting at first. I hadn't realized how destination-oriented I was until I got into the labyrinth and realized that I couldn't see where I was going. There are no choices to make in a labyrinth, you simply follow the path, but since it winds back and forth and around, it messes with your head a little. You can't see that you are making progress because you seem to be going sideways or even backward as you follow the twists and turns of the path. When you seem closest to the center you may still have a long way to go, and when you seem farthest away you may be almost there. It was a little disorienting to realize I couldn't depend on my senses the same way anymore. At first I did not like the sense of uncertainty I felt. It reminded me of how terrified I was when I was struggling with the uncertainty of not knowing what would happen to me if I got into the ordination process, and of my fears about the uncertainties

involved in making every other major commitment in my life. But as these thoughts bubbled up I kept putting one foot in front of the other in the labyrinth; I kept following the path. And as I followed, I realized that taking my eyes off the destination for a change meant that I could relax and enjoy each step along the way. There was a sense of freedom in it. The word that came to mind was the word “trust.” I could trust the path I was following, no matter how many twists and turns it had.

And I had to laugh at the irony that the seminarian who was so terrified of uncertainty would wind up, of all places, at St. Stephen’s, Heathsville. And would love it. How often the things we fear most turn out to be the things we want most. How often the things we fear most turn out to be God’s gifts to us.

I expect the disciples felt plenty of fear and uncertainty when they encountered Jesus risen from the dead. Jesus welcomes them with a lovely simplicity: “Come and have breakfast.” The shared meal is a way to love and be loved. Then Jesus tells them, “Follow me.”

The disciples could ask Jesus, “But where are we following you to? What’s the destination? What are we going to do if? How are we going to handle the problems that we might have when we get there? But I expect there is something in Jesus’ eyes that says, “Follow me.”

The final destination of our lives is death. We will get there soon enough. The gospel tells us that our lives are a gift from God. That our lives come from God and return to God in the end. The ending place is the same as the starting place, like the labyrinth. And, as it turns out, like that miniature golf course we followed, in which we went around through all the winding turns only to end up where we started. We did not get to a different place. The place we got to was the same. We were the ones who were different.

The Risen Christ invites us to play a game. The Risen Christ invites us to walk along a path. The Risen Christ invites us to a shared meal to love and be loved. The Risen Christ invites us, “Follow me.”

“Follow Me.” It isn’t about getting to a destination. It isn’t about being in a particular place. It isn’t about being able to see what’s going to happen in the future.

“Follow me” is about relationship. “Follow me” is about trust. Most of all, “follow me” is about love.