

✓ Duke, 1917

" THE RISEN LORD AND HIS STRUGGLING CHURCH "

Sermon preached before the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, evening session, May 16, 1917, by Claude W. Duke, D.D. of First Baptist Church, Tampa, Florida.

Text: John 21:4. "But when the day was now breaking Jesus stood on the beach, yet the disciples knew not that it was Jesus."

A few years ago an eager little company of American tourists were being rowed over the Sea of Galilee from the city of Tiberias to the ruins of Capernaum. It was early morning, and scudding clouds were chasing each other across the sky. The breezes, however, were gentle, and the sea was calm. The sun was just risen, and was tinting the eastern hills with emerald, azure and gold. Fishermen were drawing their boats ashore, and some were washing their nets. One little group especially attracted attention. They seemed to be discouraged, as if they had toiled all night and taken nothing. Not far away one lone man was seen strolling along the beach, and he was clad in a fisherman's garb.

Without comment or apology a brother of the travellers drew from his pocket a copy of the New Testament and read these words from the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of John; "But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples knew not it was Jesus. Jesus, therefore, said unto them: 'Children,

have ye aught to eat?' They answered Him: 'No'. And He said unto them, 'cast the net on the right side of the boat, and ye shall find.' They cast, therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. That disciple, therefore, whom Jesus loved, said unto Peter: 'It is the Lord.'"

The effect upon that little company of travellers was salutary. It seemed as if the veil of the centuries had been lifted, and the atmosphere became tremulous with the Spirit of the Man of Galilee.

It has been remarked that if we would catch the sweet aroma from the life and teachings of Jesus we must go to the Sea of Galilee, rather than the cities of Palestine. Jesus loved the city of Jerusalem, for it was the center of Jewish political and religious life. He often visited the city at the time of the great feasts. He taught there some of His most precious truths, and wrought there many of His most gracious miracles; He wept over its sins; but Jerusalem was never really the city of Jesus. We have no evidence that He ever spent a night there. Even the night of the Passover, when His enemies came to arrest Him, they found Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and when they were ready to crucify Him they again hurried Him outside the city walls. Although Jesus was born in Judaea, still He was known as a Galilean, and it was from there that His loyal disciples came. He loved the Sea of Galilee, by it He lived and fondly lingered, and there He preached and prayed and wrought His most compassionate deeds. There is no other spot on earth that is so hallowed by blessed memories of Jesus, and no other place that still breathes so evidently the charm of His Holy Spirit. Nothing is more

natural than that, after His resurrection from the dead, He should ask His disciples to meet Him in Galilee, and from its sacred soil He should send them forth with His world-wide commission.

My beloved brethren of this great Convention, this hour has been set apart by you for quiet and devout worship. From all quarters of our Southland we have come together on serious business pertaining to the kingdom of God. Momentous questions relating to the policies and methods of our work have been agitating our minds and hearts, and we are all yearning for a happy solution. No one wilfully wants to have his own way, or to tread upon the feelings of others. The one supreme desire of every heart in this great company is that we shall contribute our part in advancing the kingdom of God among men and that in so doing we shall be led absolutely by His Spirit. The, let us all be mystics tonight. We can never worship Christ aright if we think of Him simply as One who lived in a far-away country some two thousand years ago. To those disciples that morning in Galilee Jesus said: "LO, I am with you all the days, even unto the end of the world". He has kept His word. He has been with us all the days; all the long, hot, dusty days, when the sacrificing pastor and missionary was toiling at his arduous task; all the days when the ever-worked secretary was wrestling with the banks and the brethren, and with God, for means with which to feed and clothe the men and women on the firing line; all the days when the devout layman paused in the midst of his financial problems to pray, and found his office aglow with a mystical Presence; all the days when the patient mother was watching over here babe, and praying that God might call

him to preach the evangel of Jesus. He has been with us all the days; and He is with us these days. For one hour at least, then, in this Convention let us be mystics, and in our hearts seek to catch the spirit of Jesus. To this end, let us transfer ourselves in imagination to that morning when Jesus stood with His disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Already several days have passed since the resurrection. More than once have they beheld Jesus as He moved among them in the environs of Jerusalem. But He has bidden them now meet Him in Galilee, and in response to that request they have come, but He seems not to have kept His appointment. Weary of waiting and watching, they return to their nets, and pass a fruitless night. In the morning they see Jesus walking on the shore. At first they do not recognize Him, but doubtless mistake Him for an ordinary fisherman. He reveals Himself to them, instructs them about how to catch fish, assists them in the morning meal, inspires them with an abiding trust, and then assigns to them a superhuman task. What does this all mean to us? In a word, the incident suggests the Abiding Relation Between Jesus, The Risen Lord, and His Tilling Disciples. In the light of this suggestion let us study the incident. What do we see?

1. We see Jesus watching over His disciples while they work and wait. Have you never wondered where Jesus was and what He was doing during those intervening days? This much is clear: He knew where His disciples were and what they were doing, and He was watching over them. Finally, Peter, always taking the initiative, said: "I go a fishing." Do not censure him, for Jesus does not, and it is an

appropriate resolution. The others go with him. There is not the slightest intimation that they have lost hope or are about to surrender their credentials. He has promised to meet them in Galilee, and they believe that He will keep His word. They are still waiting, but they will no longer wait in idleness. There is nothing so depressing to an industrious person as enforced idleness. They must be busy at something. There is one thing they know how to do, i. e. they think they do - so back to their nets they go, and immediately Jesus reveals Himself.

Brethren, does God ever call men out of the ministry? We all agree that He calls men into the ministry, but does He ever call them out of the ministry? Suppose these men had continued strolling idly about Galilee waiting for Jesus to appear. There are ministers who think they cannot preach without a pulpit and a stated salary. I once heard a young man say that he would not think of preaching without his surplice. He thought that doing so was not in keeping with his dignity as a clergyman. When A. C. Dixon was pastor in Baltimore he formed the habit of preaching on the streets. One of his deacons took him to task about it, saying that it was undignified for the pastor of Immanuel church to be preaching on the streets as did the Salvation Army workers. "Dignity"! exclaimed Dixon; "The Bible speaks of the dignity only of kings and fools, I wonder which of them you take me to be." "After that", says the deacon, "we let him have his own way." Of course preachers ought to be dignified; but dignity is a much abused term. In current usage it is a thing that separates people from one another. Dignity is associated with exclusiveness; it inheres

in clature and dwells in the kings' palaces. In the eyes of Jesus there is but one thing that is undignified, and that thing is sin. There is but one thing that dignifies, and that is love, - love that suffers long and is kind, love that serves in purity and devotion, irrespective of social categories.

Jesus did not call these men out of the ministry. He never calls men out of the ministry until He calls them home to heaven. But suppose they had idled away the time while waiting for Him? And why did He compel them to wait? Was He putting them to the test? Really they had not fully entered the ministry. They had not finished their theological course. There is at least one more lesson they need to learn. While they wait for Him to fulfil His promise they agree to utilize their time at work rather than in loafing. Is it not suggestive that Jesus appears to them immediately after they have turned their hands to work?

Are we not in danger of putting too much professionalism into our ministry? Perhaps there is no other great denomination that is quite so free from this fault as is ours; but it is apparant that we are not anything like so free therefrom as were Jesus and His disciples. We try to abstain from calling ourselves clergymen; yet we act and speak as clergymen. We make distinctions between the ministry and the laity that Jesus and His disciples never thought of making. The whole evangelical movement of the New Testament was a layman's movement. John the Baptist was a layman, holding his commission direct from high heaven. Jesus was a layman, and we have no evidence that He as ever ordained by any ecclesiastical body.

The apostles were all laymen. In the beginning all the preachers were laymen, and all the laymen seem to have been preachers. Every believer became a propagandist, and then the faith spread like wildfire. Of course we need a ministry, and it is profoundly true that "they who proclaim the gospel shall live by the gospel," for "the laborer is worthy of his hire;" but there are dangers in the direction of professionalism. It is no accident that, with the dissemination and study of the New Testament, the layman is coming to his own in the churches. It is equally significant that our denomination stands toward the forefront of this movement. So, we need not be too anxious to draw the line between the layman and the minister. A democracy, such as was the evangelical movement of the New Testament, knew very little of such a distinction. At any rate while Jesus did not call these men out of the ministry, He did not appear to them in Galilee until they found something to do, and the thing they did was that which was nearest at hand.

II. What next do we see? We see Jesus revealing Himself to His disciples in the common-things of every-day life. Not only does He come to them after they have found something to do besides wait, but He comes robed as a plain man. When they reach the shore they see a fire of coals, and fish laid thereon and a loaf. His first act is to prepare a morning meal and participate with them therein. His first question to them is about fishing, a very common thing. Evidently this is no accident. It is all deliberately done, and there is a purpose in it. And do not lose sight of the fact that this all took place after the resurrection of Jesus.

Here is a principle of the Christian religion to which we need to address ourselves. On the mount of Transfiguration Simon Peter said: "Lord, let us make here three tabernacles." Well says William J. Dawson that this has been a fatal tendency of the churches in all their history. We build churches for the worship of Jesus, forgetting often perhaps, that the Christ of the church or the tabernacle is the Christ of the theologian, of the priest. But the Christ by the seaside is everybody's Christ!

In one of our most beautiful southern cities there is a magnificent church building occupying a spacious square in the very heart of the city. The graceful temple of worship stands well to the rear of the grounds, which are laid out into a lovely park. Asphalt walks wind from the streets to the church doors, which are all closed except on stated occasions. Magnificent oaks form a refreshing shade, and the grass and the enclosing hedge are kept beautifully trimmed. But there is not a seat in all the park inviting the wayfarer to rest and refresh himself. Instead, however, there are conspicuous signs which read as follows: "Private grounds, no loafing allowed!" Do not forget that this is the property of a wealthy church. A stranger, passing by, asked: "If these grounds belonged to Jesus Christ how long would He allow those signs to remain there?" The denomination to which that church belongs, one far in the lead in that city, is said now to be falling to the rear of the procession.

Our denomination is theoretically a democracy, and we have made our most effective appeal to the common people. We have flourished best in the country, and it is still a question whether we shall be

able to cope effectively with the problems of urban life. In our great cities, Baptists are scarcely holding pace with the ritualistic denominations. Our losses among those moving from the country to the city are alarming; and all the time the population of the cities is increasing at the expense of the country districts. While we are addressing ourselves to the problem of the country church, what are we going to do with the city: Certainly a large and fertile field of opportunity lies out of this direction. Some how the laboring people of the city do not seem to believe that the church is their best friend. If Baptists are succeeding better than other denominations in overcoming this impression the fact is not apparant. We, too, have usually joined the procession of those who move away from the poor people and follow the mansions to the suburbs. It does seem that some others have outstripped us in appealing to the common people of the city, and they have struck to the centers. They keep their church doors open day and night, while ours are closed the better part of the time. We wax eloquent about the value of a soul, proclaiming that in God's sight it is worth more than all the gold of Alaska. We affirm that the lowliest human being is created in the image of God, "is a spark lit from the altar fires of the Eternal." That sounds well, but do we mean it? That is the question. Theoretically we are followers of Jesus of Nazareth, but do we take Him seriously? Abraham Lincoln said he thought that God must take a good deal of interest in the common people because He made so many of them. Jesus acted as though He regarded that as true. He deliberately interwove His life with the common people. He chose the life of the unprivilege in

preference to that of the privileged. He sought no earthly possessions, but rather to be freed from their burden. When He invited men to follow Him He told them frankly that they must deny themselves and take up a cross.

It has been said that the very mire of the streets of the city is rich in that mysterious substance called radium. Jesus believed that their slums are rich in those qualities that glorify the kingdom of heaven. Do we agree with Him? Do the lords of American commerce agree with Him? Do the leaders in our churches agree with Him? Do the Baptists of the southland agree with Him? Do we agree with Him? We proudly say that we are followers of the meek and lowly Jesus, and we call Him Lord and Master, but the Nazarene we worship was crucified nineteen hundred years ago.

That morning when Jesus came walking on the shore of the Sea of Galilee His disciples did not recognize Him. But they recognized Him in the upper room when He entered through the fast-closed door. No doubt they would have recognized Him this morning, says Dawson, had He come down from the sky, descending with the golden beams of sunshine. But when He came as a fisherman by the lakeside, busy over a little fire, cooking a morning meal, speaking of common food rather than of the solemn secrets of the grave and of the eternal mysteries of God, they do not recognize Him. This seems ever to have been the fate of Jesus. The upper classes of His day rejected Him because He was so lowly. He came unto His own and His own received Him not, because He came not in pomp and splendor, wearing the robes of royalty and power. "Have any of the rulers believed on Him?" they asked in derision. It was because He slept in the huts of the poor people, chose His followers among the fishermen and laborers, and earned His bread by

the seat of His face, that the upper classes repudiated Him. These men, nowever, had received Him, and He had given to them the keys of the kingdom of heaven. But now that He has come forth from the dead even they think that He must have changed. Ah! He has not changed, and that is the great lesson to be gathered from this incident. He did it deliberately when He came that morning after His resurrection in the barb of a fisherman. Later, on the Mount of Olives, an angel spoke to these same disciples, saying: "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye here gazing up into heaven. This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him ascending into heaven." He walked the earth as a plain man, He ascended as a plain man, and this same Jesus promised that He would be with us all the days.

III. Again, we see Jesus instructing His disciples about their work. Peter seems not to have known as quite as much about fishing as he though he knew. They toiled all night and took nothing. You brethren of the highlands cannot appreciate what that means. I am sorrowful for the man who has never indulged in the piscatorial art, for much of his education in patience has been neglected. Who is the man who says there is no such thing as luck? Be sure no fisherman ever said it. They toiled all night and took nothing, these trained old fishermen. The first thing that Jesus did was to instruct them about fishing. That is fine. "Boys", He asked, "have ye any meat?" "Not a scale", they meekly answered. "Cast your net on the right side of the boat and ye shall find." "Think of it! Jesus knew just where the fishes were. After all, He knows more about business than the wisest business man knows. Some church members do not believe that; or they would not conduct their business as they do.

Of course we all agree that He knows more about how to run this Convention than we know. We acknowledge that daily when we pause in the midst of our deliberations for fifteen minutes of divine worship. Twelve minutes of that time, nowever, are taken up in listening to an inspirational address, always a very fine one, and we have three minutes left us for prayer and waiting on Him. Have we never read how Jesus spent whole nights in prayer to the Father when great issues were at stake?

The disciples had passed a night of fruitless toil. Many of us can get comfort from that. Brethren, have you not felt at times as if you were standing at the foot of a precipice trying to lift yourself upon it by pulling at your bootstraps? Those who toil without Jesus usually take nothing. Bryon said:

"My life is n the yellow leaf,

The flowers and fruits of love are gone,

The worm, the canker and the grief

Are mine alone."

Goethe said: "In all my life of seventy-five years I have not found a week of geniune well-being." An American statesman said: "Youth is folly, manhood is struggle, old age is regret." But that as not a fruitless night, after all, for success came in the morning. You know the story of the Congregational minister who was advised by his official board to resign his charge because his ministry had been so barren of numerical results. "Twenty years of ministry with only one boy to its credit", they complained; but that boy turned out to be Adoniram Judson. In His message to the church at Ephesus Jesus bids John tell them that He knows their work, and their toil, and their patience. Jesus knows when we are faithful, and fidelity

under His instruction is sure to bring success.

IV. And now we see Jesus seated with His disciples about the fire, committing to them a superhuman task. To be sure, Jesus addressed Himself to Simon Peter in this conversation, but what He says to Peter is understood by them as meat for all, for his sin was but slightly more exaggerated than was theirs. It is a quiet, solemn hour. Breakfast is ended and there is a pause in the conversation, when Jesus breaks the silence with this searching question: "Simon, son of John, lovest thou Me more than these?" "Simon, son of John," that was the name by which he was known before Jesus called him to be a fisher of men. How often in life we all need to go back and take stock of ourselves! "Lovest thou me more than these?" He had boasted: "Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I," It was a searching test; but let him who has not needed such a test cast the first stone.

However, we are not so much concerned now about Simon Peter as about the question which Jesus is asking him. He is not asking Simon if he is sorrowful for what he has done. He is not asking him to promise never to do so again. The matter of supreme concern to Jesus is: "Lovest thou me?" If love controls his heart, it will govern his life. What Jesus always seeks is the surrender of the affections, knowing that all else will follow that surrender. He is about to leave them. Are they going to be able to carry on His work, is the supreme question. You recall Simon's reply. It is faltering, almost evasive at first, but Jesus is satisfied of his sincerity, and He issues His commission. The triple question is followed by a triple reply, and that by a triple commission: "Feed my lambs, feed my little sheep, feed my sheep." And all the time that these things

are taking place the day is breaking and the sun is rising.

My beloved brethren of this convention, let us now turn our eyes from that barren shore and look unto Him who still claims the right to rule over the affairs of men. What is the test of our love and loyalty to Him? Not our protestations, not our prayers, not our loud hosannas! The best test of love to Christ is unquestioning obedience to His commands. "Feed my lambs, feed my little sheep, feed my sheep." The service of men is the barb of the love of God. "He that loveth God will love his brother also." "Thereby shall ye know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another."

These are perilous times through which we are passing. The war-cloud, which has for three years been belching forth its fire and thunder upon the Eastern Hemisphere, is now spreading its darkening shadows over our fair continent. Our country is calling to its service every worthy and loyal patriot, every gallant son. It is thrilling to note their responses. We rightly despise the man who refuses to bare his breast for his country's flag; but shall we be less loyal to the Prince of Peace?

In the days of the Spanish-American War, President McKinley wished to communicate with General Garcia in Cuba - an impossible thing. He called into his presence a trusted and brave lieutenant, handed him a letter, saying: "Deliver this to Garcia, and bring me his reply." The young soldier bowed his salute, and without a word he walked away. Within three weeks he was again ushered into the presence of the chief executive and handed him Garcia's reply. He had done the impossible. 'Twas his not to reason why; his but to do or die.'

We believe that our country is waging a war for the supremacy of

democracy against monarchy, for freedom against absolutism. Jesus was a democrat, one of the demos, as He walked among men. He was still one of the people after His resurrection, and He has not changed unto this good day. Out of this travail of soul there is being born a new sense of the dignity of man, a new conception of human freedom, a clearer vision of things eternal. It is the dawn of a new day for Christianity. Yes, the day is breaking and the sun is rising. It is now time for work and not for disputations. We must work the works of Him that sent us. We have a baptism to be baptized with, and how are we straitened until it be accomplished! In the volume of the Book shall it be written of us: "They came to do God's will?" May we do always the things that are pleasing to Him.

One day there walked into the Temple at Jerusalem a young man whose spirit was dejected. It was the year in which king Uzziah died - Uzziah the magnificent. Fearful problems were before the kingdom, stupendous perils were immanent on every hand, and the young Isaiah was sad in heart and burdened in soul. As he stood thus in the Temple he lifted up his eyes, and behold, Jehovah appeared! The skirts of His train filled the Temple, and above Him stood the six-winged seraphim. Out of the ineffable glory there came a voice, saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?" The young man, humble and yet courageous, replied: "Here am I, send me." and the Lord said: "Go."