

FLESH AND BLOOD

36While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 37They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." 40When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" 42They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43and he took it and ate it in their presence. 44He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." 45Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things.

"I know how you feel."

Have you ever spoken these words and then realized how foolish it was to say them -- like when you were talking to someone who was hurting or struggling with something completely outside the realm of anything you've experienced? People say words like this to someone who has lost a child – even when they haven't lost one themselves. Or to someone who has been the victim of a crime, even when they never have. A man can't know what childbirth feels like. A popular person doesn't often know what it's like to be rejected. Someone who grew up in a healthy home can't imagine what it's like to have been in an abusive home. Someone who was popular in school can't understand what it's like to be the class pariah.

But sometimes those words just slip out of our mouths because we are trying to show that we care. I remember in the early years of my ministry there was a young lady who was struggling with depression – clinical depression. And, as a young pastor who didn't yet understand clinical depression, but who had experienced some significant bouts with depression myself, I said it, "I know how you feel." From that point on, she didn't want to speak to me because she felt a lack of truth in what I said. She knew, instinctively, that I had never known the kind of depression that she knew.

"I know how you feel." A dear friend of mine, whose husband recently died of cancer, recounted to me the surprising number of people who continue to respond with personal comments about how she should grieve, what she should do to with her husband's wardrobe, how she should help her kids. And it felt, to her, so invasive that someone who hasn't lost someone prematurely to cancer should be giving her advice about her unique experience.

Maybe, if we're willing to admit it, it sometimes feels a little bit like that with God. He offers us this Word to give us strength and hope and help, but then sometimes we think to ourselves, "Yea, but you're God. How can you know the pain of my struggle when you are all-powerful, all-knowing, holy, pure, and perfect? With a snap of your fingers you can fix any problem. With a word from your mouth you can accomplish anything. How can you possibly relate to me?"

Have you felt that way? I know I have.

Maybe that's why a text like today's lesson is included in the scriptures. The disciples are feeling loss and grief because Jesus has been taken from them, and all of a sudden, there He is, right in their midst. At first they think he is a ghost, but Jesus emphatically declares: "'Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet."

He wanted them to know, now that He was raised from the dead, that His suffering and death on Calvary was no mirage or some type of spiritual trickery that made Him *appear* to be suffering when He was not. No. It was real, gut-wrenching, agonizing pain; and a real, "give up your spirit," honest-to-goodness, death. Flesh and blood. Fully human.

And then He opened up the Scriptures for them showing them how the spiritual history of Israel, with all its many sins, failures, trials and problems, all was history that, by God's design, led Him to that cross. As God saw every one of His people's evils and pains, as God felt their anguish through slavery, through abuse, through idolatry, sexual misconduct, deep hunger and thirst, vile anger and hatred, bitter division and cruel bondage, He let them know that He would one day come in human form so that they could see the depth of His compassion. So that they could know He was never just watching from a distance as an indifferent spectator, but that He knew their pain, felt their pain, suffered with them.

In Jesus, the flesh-and-blood Jesus, all that comes to a focal point. Because, in Him, the compassionate God who walked alongside His people through every experience, now BECOMES them by carrying upon His real human flesh all of their sins, all of their pains, all of their sorrows. And the impossible becomes fact: the perfect God becomes a sinner FOR US. The all-powerful God sets His powers aside to experience our limitations. The King of Kings become the Man of Sorrows FOR US. In other words, our God did not want to say "I know

how you feel,” without it being the truth. And so He did. He climbed into our experiences, walked with us through our sin-filled experiences, and led them to the cross to be paid for by His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.

The importance of this is huge. And not just for the disciples who get to hear the words for the first time. No. Huge for us, too.

Think about the difference between watching images of hungry children on TV and actually going there to BE with the children. Imagine the difference between praying for a person in the hospital and actually going to hold their hand. Imagine the difference between hearing about people picking up the pieces after a flood and actually going there and doing it. And then, stepping into each of those situations as the Son of God and bringing hope and help and strength.

That’s what Jesus’ words in our text tell us. That He not only was there to see our hard days, sad days, painful days – that He wasn’t just aware and sympathized with them -- but that on that cross, in real human flesh, He even had them in mind as He bore it all for us. And He suffered what we suffered – He felt what we felt – He knew the agony of defeat, the pain of oppression – the hurt of a trust broken. And He said, on that cross, “I’m here to take that for Phil – I’m here to take that for you.”

I look back at the 13 year old, naïve Phil Hillenbrand and remember some of the bullying that went on as I struggled to find my way among new kids in a new school. But Jesus words today invite me to see that He was there, with me, and that He took that pain with Him to the cross.

I look back at the 29 year old Phil Hillenbrand and remember the grief I felt as I saw my father taking his last breaths having been the victim of a disease that ate away at his body. But Jesus’ word today invite me to see that He was there, with my dad and with me, and that He took that sickness and its consequences to the wood of Calvary.

Sometimes it seems like the world has its way with us. But Jesus says to His disciples in our text and to us today that He wasn’t inept and uncaring in those days. No. He was there, WITH US. And on that fateful day in 30 AD He took all the flaming arrows of the enemy and all the consequences of a fallen world, and He paid the price. He took it all.

So where does that leave us? Now, today? Where do we go from here?

In our text, the next thing Jesus does is grab a piece of fish, take a bite, and go on. And what I see in that is that Jesus urges us, while still in the flesh, to hang on to His love and His compassion, and to keep going forward in faith and in hope, confident that He who began a good work in us will take it to completeness.

In other words, secure in His Easter victory over every evil, let's try to rise up from the ashes of our sin, our pain, our suffering, our agony, and let's take hold of the life that lay before us. And know, Jesus is still here, going with us, day by day by day. As He said, "I will never leave or forsake you. Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age."

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