

**The Reverend Tasha L. Blackburn**

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**Unfinished Business**

**John 21: 1-19**

This has got to be the most difficult time in Peter's life. He gave up everything for the man Jesus: his family, his livelihood. Over the last three years he'd begun to feel he might be special. He might be called to something great as he followed his teacher. But now, now all he is, is a liar. The future he'd laid out was demolished and when it came down to it he had the character of a worm. When his teacher and friend and savior needed him most he offered a bald-faced lie to save himself. Now Jesus was dead and Peter saw no way to go back and fix his mistakes and no way to move forward into any kind of future. Peter is in despair.

I cannot help but think that so many on Virginia Tech's campus are feeling this kind of despair. One ordinary morning turns so ghastly and we see so many victims whose only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. One ordinary morning and now they are gone. So many lives cut too short in such a painful way. Their families and friends and fellow students now live in that dark place of no way to go back and change what happened and seemingly no way to move forward.

I'm sure those of us in this room joined the nation this week as we together mourned and wondered how such things could happen. We have probably watched the news a bit more closely, tuned the radio for every new update, all so we could join that community in their struggle. If we are honest, though, their struggle is fairly tangential to our lives. Unless we lost a loved one there we, for the most part, are unaffected. While the reports might catch us crying and our hearts rest in our throats upon hearing it, we can turn off the radio, the television, and the moment passes. We are able to function through our day, sadder, of course, but function all the same. We know this is not true for the many who lost a loved one. They will continue to suffer and grieve for many years to come. Though tangential, if we have ever endured a time when grief and shock mingled together we understand the question we heard throughout the week. When they faced the cameras and asked, "Why?" we understood. "Why did this happen?" they asked. "Why here? Why to me?"

Last week the confirmation class met with their mentors. Together they discussed many things and one of them was to complete four or five unfinished phrases. One of the phrases was, "I believe Jesus was raised from the dead because..." This prompted some interesting discussion and a variety of answers from both Confirmands and mentors alike. One of the answers that has stuck with me was this: "I believe Jesus was raised from the dead because he still had work to do." I'll admit, at first the answer ruffled me a bit. Wasn't Christ's work sufficient for all? Was this implying he had *not* run his race and completed his mission? Of course once I thought about it I knew I was wrong for we believe Christ will come again to judge and redeem the world. Until then, as our Confirmand understood, there is, indeed, unfinished business.

This 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of John offers a piece of that unfinished business. In it Jesus offers breakfast and comfort but he does not offer any answers to "why." He does not answer why he had to suffer or why Peter is suffering. The business he has left is not about answering the "whys." Instead he gives Peter a job. He says to him, not once or twice but three times: Feed my lambs, tend my sheep. It cannot

be coincidence that it is Peter who gets the to-do list. Of all the remaining disciples it is Peter who is suffering the most grief and regret. It is also Peter who represents the rock of the new church. Remember that? When Jesus gave him the nickname? He said, From now on you're Rock and you're going to be the foundation of the church. We could say that Peter is the first Confirmand! He is also the first church member. So when the work is given to Peter, the work is also given to the church.

In confirmation class we've been discussing what it means to be a member of a church. Some mentors were happy to share their answers: It means you get to be on a committee! It means you get to vote! How many of us would say the same?! But we know that's not really it, don't we? We know that's not the point. Here, in this passage, we learn what it means. We learn that to be a church member means we have a new question to answer. When life has become as painful as it gets, when others suffer around us, we might join others in asking "why." This is good and faithful but, as the church, we immediately have another question. As the church our question in the face of tragedy is "now what." Now what can we do? Now what are we called to be? Now what can God do in this situation? For Christ's work is unfinished. His lambs are often hungry and we've been given the business of feeding them. His sheep are often in pain and we've been given the business of tending them.

"Feed and tend," Jesus says to Peter, and with that the first confirmation class is completed. And so it has continued over this last two thousand years. Men and women, boys and girls come to the church learning there is unfinished business in this world and they are a part of finishing it, in Christ's name. Today our Confirmands, each of you, join this band of the faithful. What does it now mean for you to join the church, to be a member? Like Peter and the vast millions before you, it means you've got work to do. It means we've all got work to do. Amen.