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 John 21:15-19
 Hudson
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INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE: This morning the gospel takes to some of the last words in the book of John. It's Jesus' final resurrection appearance. Jesus stands at the side of the sea . . . but his disciples don't recognize him until Jesus works another wonder. And then, after they eat together, Jesus gives them one last set of instructions. And in the midst of it, Jesus will ask Simon Peter three times if he loves him. And in doing so, he not only gives Simon Peter the chance to make amends for the three times he denied him . . . he actually gives him the chance to move forward instead of looking backward. He lets him focus on the living and present Christ instead of getting stuck on the dying and dead Jesus.

SCRIPTURE: *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."*

SERMON: Have you ever received a gift and you didn't know what to do with it? I got one of those. A few years back I was given a gift unlike I'd ever received before. A *Jesus Action Figure* – a "plastic Jesus" . . . it came from a store in the Danbury Fair Mall in Connecticut. I'd never seen anything like that before.

1. The package says it comes complete with *poseable arms and gliding action*. It's got wheels underneath.
2. And on the back it suggests that by simply giving this toy made in China (a primarily Buddhist country, mind you), that by giving this toy to children they will grow in their faith and better understand the meaning of Jesus.
3. Down here at the bottom, the package also warns that "plastic Jesus" is a "choking hazard."

I wondered about the toy . . . so I called the novelty shop where my "plastic Jesus" was purchased. And I asked the store manager, why a place like theirs (a store that advertises with the tagline, *Life's a party! We're making it fun!*) . . . why, I asked, would they sell a "white plastic Jesus?" Had they shifted their focus from off-beat party gags to religious

icons? The manager assured me they hadn't. He said, *Plastic Jesus is meant to be a joke . . . but (he said), some people don't find it funny.* And he's right. It's not funny at all. Making a mockery of someone's faith, is a choking hazard. The white plastic Jesus is the third top seller for the company that makes it – right behind their “Plastic Pig Catapult” and their “Plastic Chicken Chucker.” It's true. I checked.

It made me wonder . . . is that what our faith has become? Strangely, ironically, a company founded with the sole purpose of producing gag gifts may have hit on something more significant. For critics of the faith, Christianity is nothing but a silly relic of the past – a dead, memorialized faith still clung to by a few. So is that what's become of the faith? Is that what's become of us? Is that what our faith is about? Not according to the Gospel of John.

In John, Jesus says follow me. He's not looking back at something once done and now over.

He's looking ahead.

He says, follow me.

Carry the faith – new, alive, evolving, ever changing, and fully engaged in the now.

Follow me. Follow me. Take note here. This is how the gospel ends. Jesus doesn't finish by saying:

- Stay put.
- Remain right here.
- Make a memorial so no one will forget me.

No . . . he tells Simon Peter: *Follow me.*

He called Simon Peter.

And he called the other disciples.

And he calls us.

He calls us all into an organic faith –

Into a faith that's rough and crude and unrefined.

Into a faith that's still growing, evolving, becoming.

He said: *Follow me.* That's what Jesus said.

For some people, the faith is a lot like a plastic Jesus . . . hollow, empty, meaningless, a relic of the past.

Think of it this way: In his book, To Begin at the Beginning, Martin Copenhaver says that we should imagine what it's like when somebody dies and there are a lot of people who really loved him. At first they're in shock. They don't know what to say, what to do. In time, though, they begin to talk to each other and remember stories – his habits and mannerisms and forever mismatched socks. They remember what he stood for and some of what he said. And in the remembering together, they gain strength and form bonds with each other. And they decide that the stories shouldn't be forgotten – that they need to be spread to others.

Now imagine that the person being remembered was saintly in almost every way. Cared for those who needed it most. Didn't bow to peer pressure. Was meek and selfless. But now he's dead. Gone and there's nobody to fill his shoes. So somebody suggests that they start doing the things he did in his name to honor him. Then, people won't just hear about how good he was, they'll experience him.

There are some people who say that's all the church is . . . a bunch of people clinging to the memory of Jesus. A bunch of people remembering somebody – who may have been great – but has been dead some two-thousand years.

And that *IS* what the church is. A people who remember and follow. That's what the church is . . . at least in part. But John says, this thing we call faith has nothing to do with death . . . because it has everything to do with life. And it's not about clinging to a dead leader . . . because it's about following the living Christ. (Martin Copenhaver, To Begin at the Beginning, pp. 83-84)

Jesus last words in John didn't say: "remember me."

They said, "Follow me."

They didn't say create a shrine so I won't be forgotten.

They said, "Feed my sheep."

And the real question for us as people of the living faith, is less, "Where have we been," than it is . . . "where will we go."

So what does it mean to follow the living Christ? I never really noticed it before . . . but I think it's all summed up in that next line of scripture – a line that points to Jesus crucifixion and Simon Peter's own martyrdom. And yet I think it also speaks directly to what it means to follow. *Very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.*"

What's that mean? When you were young, you thought life was about self. About learning who you are and self-discovery, self-sufficiency, self-fulfillment. When young it was about preparing, getting ready, and then living out destiny. Not so, says Jesus. When you grow old you'll find out that life isn't so much about self as about living for others. Not so much about personal control and authority as it is about sharing and empowering others. It's about moving beyond taking responsibility for self and taking on the burdens of others. A life consumed with our own desires, needs, and wishes will always prove hollow – like leaning on a plastic Jesus. A life filled with self-sacrificial love for others (on the other hand) may well include much pain and struggle . . . but will bring meaning and worth to the living. And . . . *AND* it will be a following in the way of the living Christ.

The gospel this morning begs the question: who is Jesus to you?

- A plasticized dead icon from the past, a great memory to be clung to.
- Or is he the living active Christ.

The living Christ. Think of it. Where is he calling you to today?

Who needs your feeding?

Who needs your love?

It's probably somebody sitting right beside you . . . so close that you often fail to see their need. And it's probably someone else you'd never expect. Somebody you barely know . . . or maybe somebody you'd rather not know. That's who Jesus fed. And on this fourth Sunday of Easter, he says to us: Follow me.