

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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John 21:1-19 (NRSV)

[1] After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. [2] Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. [3] Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

[4] Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. [5] Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." [6] He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. [7] That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. [8] But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

[9] When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. [10] Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." [11] So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. [12] Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. [13] Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. [14] This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

[15] 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." [16] 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." [17] 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. [18] Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to 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." [19] (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

SIGN UP TO STAY AT HOME

All of us have days when we feel like Charlie Brown's sister Sally. Remember little Sally from the old comic strip, Peanuts?

In one comic Sally is bemoaning the start of yet another school year. Last year school did not begin well for her. She was in the wrong class for two weeks. When she did finally make it to the right room, she was in the wrong desk, and she couldn't get her locker open all year.

She said that she was in the school band for three days until she finally figured out that the school didn't have a band. In essence, nothing went right.

As she reviews the disasters of last year's school year she finally tells her brother in disgust, "I think I'll just sign up for staying at home."

That's a feeling that many of us can understand. Some days nothing seems to work, and it seems like it would be better to just stay home and hide.

That seems to be what is happening with the disciples as they huddle around a campfire by the Sea of Galilee.

For two years they had followed Jesus. Hopes and expectations had been raised to a fevered pitch only to be crushed by the cruel blow of the cross.

But, all was not bad. The tomb in which they had laid Jesus was empty, and the risen Christ had appeared to them, first to Mary Magdalene and then to the disciples in the upper room. It all happened just as he had said, and Christ gave these disciples a job to do. He told them,

"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." (John 20:21)

In other words Jesus had given the disciples the task of carrying the message of God's kingdom into the world. They were to spread the good news and hope of the resurrection to all people.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

But, they didn't do it, at least not right away. Instead they went back home and gathered on the shore by the sea. They are not quite sure what to do next. Their leader, Jesus was gone.

You'll remember that Mark's gospel begins with a story about the disciples fishing. Jesus called these men to be his disciples by saying, "Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." And they did it. They put down their nets and left their jobs to follow Jesus.

But, now, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, it seems like they are returning to business as usual. Like Sally they've decided to sign up for staying at home. Hanging with Jesus gave them a bit more adventure than they wanted.

I think I can understand why. There is comfort in the routine of home. Breakfast is at six; school is out at three; mom and dad come home at five-thirty; dinner is at seven.

It might seem boring at times, but there is comfort in the boredom. We know what to expect. At least we did until Jesus came into our life.

On the day that he barged in our life and commanded us to drop our hammers, put down our knitting needles, turn off our computers and follow him.

Life, he told us wasn't about the comfort of routine. Life was about the great adventure that is God's plan for our life.

But, like those first disciples we're not so sure that we want an adventure. We want a job. We want to know how to pay the Visa bill and our medical insurance. We want to know who will pick up the children after school and take the dog to the vet.

Thanks for the parables and the miracles Jesus. They were lovely. But, we can do without the resurrection, at least a resurrection that intrudes upon the comforting routine of our daily schedule.

GONE FISHING

Peter was always one to get the action going in the slow times. He was one of those leaders who was often wrong but never in doubt! He told the other disciples,

"I don't know about you, but I'm going fishing."
And the other disciples said, "Good idea." But, it turned out not to be such a good idea after all. All night long they fished and caught nothing. Not only had they abandoned Jesus' call to be fishers of men, now they weren't even good fishers of fish.

But, as daylight begins to dawn, the discouraged fishermen notice a solitary figure on the shore. He calls out to them, "Cast your net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some fish." They do as they are told and the catch is so great that they are not able to haul it into the boat.

THE RISEN LORD CHANGES EVERYTHING

The appearance of Jesus by the shore is the third of three appearances of the risen Christ in John's gospel. You would think that after seeing him in the upper room the disciples would have been expecting to see Jesus again.

But, in all the resurrection stories the coming of the risen Lord is always a surprise. His coming interrupts the normal flow of things. In the light of resurrection, it is no longer possible to conduct business as usual.

It was the same this day. John recognizes Jesus. And that changes everything. John shouts, "It is the Lord."

And impulsive Peter is no longer interested in fishing. He throws on some clothes, jumps in the water and swims toward Jesus. The other disciples struggle in with the catch and find that Jesus already has a charcoal fire going and is asking for some fish to fry.

Peter takes the lead again, helping the other disciples to drag the filled nets to shore. There are 153 large fish in the net.

ALL THE FISH IN THE SEA

Now you might wonder, "What is the significance of that?" Why would the gospel writer want us to know this particular figure?

I found out that it may not be a random number. According to Jerome, some Greek teachers of the day held that there were 153 kinds of fish in the sea ... so; the number symbolized the fact that the disciples were able to catch every kind of fish in the sea. The accuracy of that interpretation is somewhat in doubt, but there is no doubt that the disciples were overwhelmed by the enormity of the catch.

I suspect that early readers of the gospel would remember the prophecy of Ezekiel who, in one of his visions about the coming of God's kingdom, saw "fishermen standing along the shore" and he said that the fish caught were of "many kinds." (Ezekiel 47:10) In Ezekiel's prophecy the great number of fish represented the abundance of God's blessing in the coming age.

But, for the early church, the great number of fish also came to represent the conversion of people from all over the world to the cause of Christ.

And so, I think when the early church read this story, they understood it to be a symbolic story about mission. Christ has called his disciples to cast their nets into the sea, to bring the message of resurrection and salvation to the whole world. And wherever the message was preached, there would be a great catch.

We have a saying that goes, "I have other fish to fry." It means, of course, that we've got something else to do that is more important than just the usual business. I think that's what Jesus is telling his disciples in a symbolic way. He is reminding them that they have been called to be fishers of men and women. They have been called to prepare a banquet of hope, to feed Christ's sheep all over the world.

LOVE AND A NEW LIFE

One important aspect of today's passage is that the action revolves especially around one disciple. It is none other than Mr. "Foot in Mouth" himself, Peter. Peter was the one who was inclined to act before thinking, and in the end, he was the one who denied what he believed in most deeply.

I think that many of us can identify with Peter. Many of us have the disconcerting habit of always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. We don't understand what we should understand. We have the best of intentions, but our good intentions are always leading us down the wrong road, that road to perdition.

Today's resurrection story is for us. The risen Christ still comes to rehabilitate fallen disciples like you and me, and the rehabilitation of Peter provides the model for how that happens.

Three times Jesus asked Peter essentially the same question, "Do you love me?"

Three times Peter answered, "Lord, you know that I love you." And three times Jesus told Peter to show that love by feeding and tending his sheep.

It's important to note that this encounter with the risen Christ was not an easy one. The Bible tells us that Peter was hurt by the fact that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?"

I wonder if Peter was thinking about the fact that not too long ago he denied Jesus three times in the time of testing. Perhaps Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" as a way of cleansing him for the three sins of denial.

Cleansing from sin is possible, but it is never an easy process. But, through this difficult encounter Peter is led into a whole new world of possibilities and responsibilities.

A NEW JOB

The same sort of thing needs to happen with us. You see; in order to be healed from the scars of sin, we, like Peter, have to get beyond our own problems by embracing the job that Christ gives us to do.

Jesus not only forgave Peter for his denials, he gave him a job to do. He told Peter, "Feed my sheep."

We are given the same challenge. Bathed in the forgiveness of the risen Christ, we are called to bring the gospel to the world in word and deed. But, it is not something that we can do on our own terms. We must be willing to go where God leads us and do what God calls us to do.

Jesus told Peter that his life would no longer be his own. He said,

[18] Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to 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." John 21:18 (NRSV)

We have to realize that once we encounter the risen Christ there is no more business as usual.

We have been called to a wild adventure that will last our entire lives. It is no longer what we want to do that matters. It is what God wants us to do that matters.

LETTING GO AND LETTING GOD

Cecil Murphy was a pastor in Atlanta, Georgia who had a dream of developing a vital, active caring church. What he got was an inner city church that soon closed due to changes in the neighborhood.

Cecil said that he took that defeat to heart and stomach. He developed an ulcer and from Good Friday to Good Monday of the Easter weekend this young, unemployed minister was alone with God. He thought about leaving the ministry and going back to teaching. After all, that job seemed to have more regular hours and concrete expectations.

And yet, for some reason he couldn't bring himself to make the transition and complete the forms he had on his desk from the Dekalb County Board of Education.

On the other hand, he didn't have any job prospects in the ministry either. Finally, he became so weary with the whole business that he

prayed, "Lord, I'm too tired to pray about it anymore. Do whatever you want with my life."

And when he did that, when he surrendered his life completely to the Lord, it was then that he found peace. He knew that the Lord would give him sheep to tend and feed. He knew that the Lord would open up an opportunity for meaningful ministry in the kind of caring church he longed to lead.

Not long after that, Cecil became pastor of the Riverdale Presbyterian Church, a church that became known in Atlanta Presbytery for being a vital and above all, a caring church. In fact, Cecil wrote a book about his experiences at the Riverdale Church and entitled it, "When in Doubt Hug'em"!

The risen Lord brought him sheep to feed, and that brought healing to a discouraged disciple.

I think that it works the same way for us. The practical power of the risen Christ is experienced through the sheep that we are called to feed, the people we are called to hug and love. If we love Jesus, it will show in our relationships with others. Indeed, we will find the Spirit of Christ in those encounters.

THE OLD BALL PLAYER

Babe Ruth had hit 714 home runs during his baseball career and was playing one of his last major league games. The aging star was playing for the Boston Braves against the Cincinnati Reds that day.

He was no longer as agile as he once had been. He fumbled the ball and threw badly. In one inning alone, his errors were responsible for five Cincinnati runs. (Sounds like he could play on our team!)

As the Babe walked off the field after the third out, booing and catcalls cascaded from the stands. Just then a young boy jumped over the railing onto the playing field. And with tears streaking down his face, he threw his arms around the legs of his hero.

Ruth didn't hesitate. He picked up the boy, hugged him, and set him down on his feet with a playful pat on the head. Suddenly the booing stopped. In fact, a hush fell over the entire park. In those brief moments, the crowd saw a different kind of hero, a man who in spite of a dismal day on the field could still care about a little boy.

On that day he was no longer being judged by his past successes or his present failures. Now he was being judged by a completely different standard. He was being judged not by his works but by the power of a caring relationship.

Many of us go through life like an aging ball player ... misjudging a fly ball here and throwing a wild pitch there. Sometimes it seems like our whole life is an example for all to see of just how inadequate we are in every respect.

But, Christ doesn't ask how many home runs we can hit. Christ doesn't insist that our fielding be impeccable. All Christ asks is this, "Do you love me?" And if our answer is "yes" his command to us is still the same as it was for Peter. Christ tells us, "Feed my sheep."

Sometimes life is just another day at the beach, business as usual ... or so it seems.

But, I would suggest that appearances are deceiving. I would suggest that the stranger on the shore just might be Jesus. I would suggest that there is more to this world than we can ever know.

I would suggest that the kingdom still comes and the power of the risen Christ is still seen in the most mundane things, things like a pat on the head, a caring touch and the words, "I love you."

MEETING CHRIST IN THE ORDINARY

This passage of Scripture is seldom used on Easter Sunday. We usually preach from more dramatic passages that emphasize the empty tomb, the frightened women and the cataclysmic events associated with the resurrection.

In contrast, today's scene is so ... well, ordinary. Seven fishermen are squatting in a circle around the fire as Jesus offers them breakfast on the beach.

And yet, I find the ordinary setting to be helpful. Breakfast on the beach with Jesus has its own peculiar glory. This story seems to suggest that not only is Jesus raised from the dead; his Spirit is with us here and now in our workaday world.

In our home we pray before meals. It is a very routine process, and yet sometimes when I say that very simple prayer I remember. Yes, Jesus is here with us. He has always been here, but sometimes we forget that there is more to our life than just business as usual.

Most of us think of resurrection as something that happens to us after we die. We're taken up to be in another world with Jesus. And that's true.

But, this story reminds us that Jesus didn't meet his disciples first in some strange new world. Jesus told his disciples that after the resurrection he would meet them in Galilee. And that's exactly what happened.

When the risen Christ encountered his disciples they weren't in another world. They weren't strumming on harps of gold. They were in the place that they knew best. They were in the workaday world of home, and Jesus was there.

We in the church have gone to great lengths to make the celebration of Easter special. We have the 40 days of preparation for the big event, a season we call Lent. In days gone by the celebration of Easter was about more than just one Sunday. The church celebrated what they called "The Great 50 Days of Easter."

Those celebrations are still on the church calendar, but we no longer celebrate like we used to. Come Easter Monday I dare say all of us will be back to business as usual. And some of you know the unofficial name for next Sunday ... Low Sunday! Many preachers take a week of vacation to recover from the extra services of Holy Week.

But, next week as you struggle with reports and taxes and making breakfast and getting kids off to school and all the routine tasks that make up your day, take just a few moments to think of this story. The resurrection of Jesus is too awesome an event to just be confined to one day of the year. Sometimes we can even see that power during the ordinary times.

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES

The risen Christ appeared to his disciples on a discouraging workday long ago, and that changed everything forever. Perhaps he still comes in that way. Perhaps we have a Savior who redeems all of our lives, and not just special Sundays.

Most of us want our lives to be safe, predictable, boring and dead. I might talk about wanting a little excitement in my life, but I'm not so sure that's what I really want.

In fact, the older I get, the more predictable I want life to be. I prefer the comfort of the sofa, the television and the internet. In short I prefer the tomb of my own safety and comfort.

But, God loves us too much to leave us in such a situation. We serve a God of the living and not a God of the dead. This God calls us out of the tombs of our own making and into the joy of new, unpredictable life everlasting.

One thing we need to know. God's plans are not our plans. The mysterious stranger on the shore still invites us to cast our nets on the other side of the boat and embark on God's magnificent and unpredictable journey.

Next week take a few moments to look and listen.
Can you see him standing on the shore? Can you hear his call?

May God help us perceive the power of Easter this day and every day.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN