

No Turning Back

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John 21:1-19 (NRSV)

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."

YOU CAN'T RUN

I've kept a cartoon on the bulletin board these past few years, and I've printed it in the bulletin today. Two frightened soldiers stand outside the empty tomb, and one sheepishly says to the other, "I guess this leaves only taxes as being for certain."

For those who first witnessed the events surrounding the resurrection it was an earth shaking event. That was literally true for the guards who stood by the tomb. The Bible tells us that a severe earthquake occurred and that the guards shook for fear and became like dead men. (Matthew 28:4)

When we have to start guarding our tombs (unsuccessfully I might add), you know it's a whole new world. The religious officials tried to downplay what had happened by spreading the rumor that the disciples had stolen the body. (Matthew 28:12-15)

But, their plan didn't work. Too many people had seen the risen Lord. You can't go back to the old way of life when you have encountered the risen Lord. As our anthem put it (will put it) this morning, "Run, run you can run, but you can't get away from God's love." That was true for them, and that is true for us as well.

God in Christ pursues us. Once we know about the risen Christ, there is no going back to the old way of life.

GONE FISHING

But, those first disciples tried their best to go back.

According to John they saw the risen Lord on two different occasions before today's encounter takes place. On two different occasions Jesus breaks through the locked doors where the disciples are huddled together in fear and unbelief.

He shows them his nail scarred body, and they rejoice that he is alive. The risen Christ breathes the holy Spirit into them, and charges them to spread the good news. You would think that two encounters with the risen Christ would be enough to change their lives forever.

It wasn't. Jesus told the disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21) And what did the disciples do after Jesus gave them this charge to spread the word of forgiveness and hope to the world?

They went fishing.

Simon said, "I'm going fishing."

And the disciples who are with him say, "We'll go too."

A baseball pitcher in a tight game was facing a great hitter. He kept shaking off all the pitches the catcher called for.

The catcher became very frustrated and finally approached the mound and said,

"I have called every pitch in the world.

What do you want?"

And the pitcher said,

"I want to hold on to the ball as long as I can."

I think we disciples are often like that pitcher. The charge that Jesus has given us is very challenging, and instead of trying to throw the pitch he, we just try to hold onto the ball as long as possible. We say, "Let's go fishing!"

In today's lesson we learn that we can't retreat forever. There comes a time when we have to let go of our fears and recognize the fact that God is in charge of our lives.

NO MORE BUSINESS AS USUAL

Do you remember when Jesus first called his disciples? He called them to abandon their jobs. He called them to drop their nets, leave their boats, leave their family and friends and then come follow him.

Amazingly they did it.

But, now they seem unable to believe what they have seen and heard. It feels as if it is just too good to be true. So, they try to re-enter their old pre-Easter life. They try to go back to what is familiar and act as if nothing has happened. Let's go fishing.

Isn't this a parable of our world after Easter? Once a year we proclaim the most astounding news. We say, "He is risen!"

The pews are filled with people from far and wide. No one wants to miss church on Easter. It's almost like we're a tourist attraction.

And then it's back to business as usual. We go back to the same old world and do the same old things in the same old way.

Did we really believe what we said? And if we did believe, shouldn't that belief change how we live?

If he is risen as he said doesn't that mean a new life for everyone? Doesn't that mean that the world can never be the same? Doesn't that mean that *our* world can never be the same? Indeed it does.

Who can think about going fishing after Easter? It's just not possible. The risen Christ won't leave us alone.

THE PRESENCE ON THE SHORE

That's the message in our gospel story for today. We find that the risen Christ kept intruding into the disciples' lives. He wouldn't let the disciples go back to business as usual. He once again came to them, this time he was on the shore as they fished.

And once again the disciples didn't recognize him. Once again the disciples weren't expecting Jesus to intrude upon their lives.

Jesus called to them from afar. He said, "I see that you have no fish. Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you'll catch some." They did as they were told, and the net was filled with fish.

In the gospel of Luke there is a similar story.

Jesus had told the disciples to cast out into deep water and let down their nets.

Peter protested that they had been fishing all night and hadn't caught a thing. But, because Jesus told him to do it, they did it.

Well, they caught so much fish that the boat began to sink and it scared them out of their wits.

And in the gospel of Luke, it was after this miracle that the fisherman decided to follow Jesus.

I suspect that's why John and Peter recognized Jesus in this very similar miracle. When Christ came into their world, it could no longer be business as usual.

There is no such thing as a mundane fishing trip with Jesus.

When Jesus appeared, everything exploded — exploded into wonder, miracle and extravagance.

And when Jesus comes into our life,
the same thing happens to us as well.

EVERYTHING OUT OF KILTER

A character in one of Flannery O'Connor's stories put it this way, "Jesus done thrown everything out of kilter." I think that summarizes it very well.

The resurrection means that nothing is for sure, not even death. God in Christ has thrown everything out of kilter. He has turned everything inside out and upside down. A cross, an implement of death has become a symbol of eternal hope, and even a guarded tomb cannot hold its prey.

And you can't run from a God like that. A God like that can't be bought and sold. A God like that can't be controlled for political gain.

Before the resurrection, people could be controlled by a fear of death. If people had a message that was contrary to the powers that be, the government could put down their revolution by the threat of a cross.

But, suppose people no longer feared a cross? What happens if the very implement of fear was transformed into a symbol of salvation?

I tell you what happens.

Fearful disciples are changed into courageous proponents of the faith, and people from all over the world become believers. They are caught in the nets cast by these fishermen who have left fishing for fish in order to fish for men and women.

Through the ministry of Spirit empowered disciples, the story of the risen Christ continues. The risen Christ is loose in the world, and He's still surprising everyone with his message and power.

That's why John writes in the last line of his gospel,

"But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

John 21:25 (NRSV)

The story of the risen Christ is still being written, and the world cannot contain or control the message.

JESUS IS LORD

Shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus a couple of Christian missionaries, Paul and Silas began preaching the story about Jesus. They told how he had suffered and died and how on the third day he was raised from the dead.

Not long after they began preaching in this way the authorities tried to shut them up. A mob appeared at the home of their host, Jason and dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities. What was their charge?

They said, "These people have been turning the world upside down. And now they have come here to mess things up. Their preaching is contrary to our customs. They say that there is another king, a king named Jesus."

The charges weren't false. That's exactly what they were saying. In the ancient world, the people believed that kings ruled by divine right. In fact they took it one step farther and said that Caesar was Lord. Caesar was divine. Imperial proclamations spoke of Augustus as "Son of God" the Emperor and savior of the whole world.

Followers of the risen Christ disagreed. They said, "Jesus is Lord." And if that is true, then it means Caesar is not Lord.

The apostle Peter after being empowered by Pentecostal power preaches the first sermon. And in that sermon he makes this point crystal clear. He says that the risen Christ has put all the other Lords "at his feet."

No wonder the disciples tried to go fishing instead of following the risen Christ. Fishing was much safer.

But, that wasn't what they were called to do. If they loved Jesus they would need courage to confront those imperial powers that sought to build their kingdoms on the backs of the poor. If they loved Jesus, they would have to take up a cross and follow him. If they loved Jesus, they would have to do more than just go fishing.

DO YOU LOVE ME?

Peter always loved Jesus. When he saw the miraculous catch of fish, he dived into the water to be with him as soon as possible. But, Peter, like us, struggled to find the courage to follow Jesus.

Peter didn't like the idea of a suffering Messiah. He once rebuked Jesus for even talking that way. Peter liked the idea of a Messiah who could make things go his way and vanquish his enemies.

Peter wanted to be the brave one, but when the chips were down, three times Peter denied the Lord he loved so much.

What could Jesus do to help Peter take the next step? How could he turn his loving desire into action? How could he help him see that there was more to life than just another fishing trip? How could he heal the guilt and despair that still ruled his life?

Jesus decided to ask Peter the same question three times. Peter, do you love me? Twice Peter answers this question the same way. "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you." And Jesus tells him to "feed my sheep or tend my sheep."

The meaning of Jesus' words in both cases is essentially the same. It means to care for God's people by being compassionate and keeping them from harm. As a shepherd looked after his helpless sheep, so Peter was being charged to tend God's flock.

But, when Jesus asks Peter the question the third and final time, it cuts him to the quick. Perhaps Peter remembered that third time when he was asked if he knew Jesus, and he denied him for the third and final time. At any rate, an anguished Peter cries out, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you."

Jesus responds once more, "Feed my sheep."

A LOSS OF INDEPENDENCE

Peter does love Jesus, but now he must love him enough to sacrifice for him. No longer will his life be business as usual. No longer will Peter have the ability to go back to the old way of life.

When he was young, he may have been able to do what he wanted to do. But, that will no longer be possible. No more fishing trips for Peter. Following Jesus will mean losing his independence. In fact one day Peter would die for his faith in Jesus.

When I ask people what they fear the most, some mention death. But, many more mention losing their independence. They fear others telling them where to go and what to do. They fear that they might be led to a place where they do not want to go.

This fear is not limited to older people who are being required by the circumstances of life to downsize or move to a new place in their retirement.

Young people have the same fear. They are afraid of being dominated by their parents or forced into a vocation that does not suit them.

Middle aged people worry about losing their freedom as they are squeezed in the struggle to care for children in college and aging parents.

Ministers also are afraid of losing their independence. I am sometimes amused at young ministers who are seeking their first church. They often want just the right place that meets their specifications and their needs in every way. And I think to myself,

"Didn't you read that postscript in the gospel of John? Didn't you realize that when Jesus calls us to follow him there's a clause that says following means just that, following? It's no longer about what you want. It's about where you're called!"

Whether you are young, old or in between, Jesus calls you. He calls you to give up your independence, take up a cross and follow him.

I HAVE DECIDED TO FOLLOW JESUS

And strangely enough, when we quit trying to go on our own fishing trips and start following Jesus instead, we find that we don't miss our independence at all. In fact, we're relieved that Jesus has called us to follow instead of lead.

There is a comfort in knowing that the unrecognized face of Jesus is always on the shore encouraging us to cast our nets on the other side.

Remember that old hymn, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus?" It went, "I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back."

Following Jesus is like taking a dive off a cliff into a deep pool of water. You can't say halfway down, "I've changed my mind!" And yet so many would be followers of Jesus try to do just that. Like Peter they try to make compromises between the call of Jesus and the call of the world. And that just never works.

Cecil Murphy was a pastor who dreamed of developing a vital, active caring church. What he got was an inner city church that soon closed after he came as pastor due to changes in the neighborhood.

Cecil said that he took the 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 any more. 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 a church that was know far and wide for being an active and above all, caring church. In fact Cecil wrote a book about his experiences at that church entitled, "When in Doubt Hug 'em." The risen Lord brought him sheep to feed, and that brought healing to a discouraged disciple.

I think that the same is true for us. The power of the risen Christ is experienced through the sheep 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, and we will meet Jesus in those relationships.

Today's story teaches us that appearances can be deceiving. The stranger on the shore just might be Jesus, reminding us of who we are and whose we are.

He asks us gently but persistently and repetitively,
"Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?"

And when we say "yes", he tells us, "Follow me. Tend my sheep and put your future in my hands."

Have you decided to follow Jesus? Remember. No turning back. No turning back.

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