

John 21:1-19

21:1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he showed himself in this way.

21:2 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.

21:3 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.

21:4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

21:5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No."

21:6 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.

21:7 That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he had taken it off, and jumped into the sea.

21:8 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.

21:9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.

21:10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."

21:11 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.

21:12 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.

21:13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish.

21:14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

21:15 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."

21:16 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."

21:17 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.

21:18 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."

21:19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

Sermon: Holy Mackerel!

Peter was understandably tired. The last few weeks had been hectic: a triumphant entry into Jerusalem; a last meal together; the trial and execution of Jesus; his burial; several appearances by Jesus after his death, and way too much time hiding from the authorities in a dark, cramped room.

And Peter's head must have been spinning with internal questions: What do all these events mean? For Jesus? For me? For all creation? And what's next? And what's my role in all of this?

And at some point, Peter thought to himself, "I need to clear my head." Therefore, Peter does the most logical thing he's done in all of John's gospel up to this point: He decides to go on a staycation. That's right, he makes up his own 'Gone Fishin' sign, and heads for the Sea of Galilee. "You comin'?" he asks the other disciples. And everyone agrees: "Road Trip!!!" So off they go.

And it turns out that the disciples' fishing trip was like every fishing trip I've ever been on that didn't include a stocked pond or a professional angler – it was empty – they caught nothing!!!

But something tells me this fishing trip provided much needed rest and clarity.

As the boat makes its way to shore, they notice a strange man standing on the beach. And he notices them. And he also notices their boat is empty. "Children, you have no fish, do you?"

"Nope," they say, "The fish aren't biting today."

The stranger offers some advice: "Cast your net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some."

Remember how I told you I thought the disciples found rest and clarity on their fishing trip? I think this is the first example. They don't roll their eyes. They don't dismiss the advice of the stranger. They don't tell him to mind his own business. Instead, they trust the stranger's instincts and follow his instructions.

Next thing you know, their net is filled with fish – it's so full, the net can barely contain its contents. And it's so full, it's too heavy to be hauled into the boat. In fact, the net is comically big, perhaps so big, that it lifts the nose of the boat out of the water, as the vessel struggles to carry it to shore.

Amid this happy chaos, the beloved disciple senses immediately that the stranger is Jesus, and proclaims to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Upon

hearing this, Peter jumps into the sea, and makes a beeline for the shore, swimming for Jesus just as fast as he can.

This verse makes me think of scenes in the movie *Forest Gump* – the scene where Forest abandons his Oyster Boat to enthusiastically greet his friend Lt. Dan; or the one where he swims to shore without a minute to lose in attending to his sick mother. Peter runs to Jesus with every ounce of devotion and energy.

And can you see behind Peter? That boat, being tugged by a huge fish-ball and manned by a half-dozen disciples filled with joy and amazement, each one desperately trying to stay upright and wrangle fish and wave hello to Jesus all at the same time. And of course, the beloved disciple, sitting in the boat, lost in the moment, eyes fixed on Jesus, too busy being all-theological to be of any use to the crew.

And can you see in front of Peter? There is Jesus, wearing a cat-that-ate-the-canary kind of grin. And he thinks to himself, “I love these knuckleheads!!!”

Jesus sits back in his lawn chair, and stokes a charcoal fire as he waits for the disciples to make it ashore. Once everyone’s on the beach, Jesus invites them to a cookout. The old friends share a breakfast of grilled fish and bread. And once more, we can tell the fishing trip has done the disciples some good. They simply enjoy the presence of God in their midst. There’s no jockeying for Jesus’ favor. There’s no deep theological debate. There’s just silence; and perhaps the occasional grunt of satisfaction that accompanies full stomachs; and stillness; and peace; and maybe even a sunrise. Jesus is in their midst. And that’s enough.

After breakfast, Jesus pulls Peter aside, and asks the same question three times: “Do you love me?” Each time Peter responds with fervor: “Yes, Lord! You know that I love you!!!”

With each confirmation, Jesus gives Peter a command: “Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep.”

Jesus is commissioning and blessing Peter to lead the disciples, and in fact, what is to become the Church or the formalization of the God movement. But this commissioning also comes with a warning: Feeding sheep and tending lambs will bring hardship and persecution. Up until this point, Peter has followed a path of his own choosing. Now, Peter will follow a path that will not be comfortable.

Jesus tells Peter, “I know you love me. I know you are sincere. And now, you must follow me.”

And poof. Just like that our lection concludes. It’s a strange text really. It’s an epilogue or an encore. An extra chapter after the Easter narrative. But it’s a necessary epilogue.

Thomas Troeger writes that this epilogue “tells us the curtain may have come down on John’s narrative, but the real-life drama of Christ is continuing.” Jesus may be gone, but the miracles don’t cease. Nets still fill up with fish in the presence of the resurrected Jesus. The disciples shared a last meal together, but communion can always be resurrected, even in an impromptu fish-fry on the beach. Jesus may no longer be physically present with Peter, but the resurrected Jesus will be present as Peter follows his footsteps into places of pain and hardship and uncertainty.

My friend Nancy Davis is a story-teller. And she says that any good story should always begin: “A long time ago, but not so long ago that it couldn’t have happened yesterday...”

I believe this is the power of John’s gospel, and particularly its epilogue. Two thousand years ago, Jesus encountered people who felt alienated and abandoned. He poured out his love and his hospitality, and in so doing well water became living water; water basins became wine jugs, a can of sardines and a pack of saltines became food for five thousand; a cup of wine and a hunk of bread became an invitation to the life abundant. It was two thousand years ago, but it all could have happened yesterday.

And as a matter of fact, it could even happen today. Somewhere in Raleigh, somebody is Samaritanized by stigma, and perhaps like the Samaritan woman at the well, they are seeking the social shelter of noon-day heat – rather than a well, perhaps it’s a bus stop, or church narthex, or even a bathroom. We can offer them living water.

Somewhere in Raleigh, a family feels embarrassed or ashamed, unable to provide in ways they wish they could, and so they serve water to wedding guests. We can offer them the sweet wine of community.

Somewhere in Raleigh, a group of neighbors struggles to find a meal; we’ve got more than enough in our lunch pails to share.

Somewhere in Raleigh, someone has been told they don’t belong, they’re too broken to be included. We can invite them to our table.

Somewhere in this city, there are twelve basketfuls of provisions, and living wells deeper than Jacob could imagine, and nets just waiting to

Holy Mackerel!
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Bob Stillerman
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burst at the seams with Galilean fish, and truth and abundance beyond our imagination.

Friends, a long time ago, John the evangelist penned a story about a man named Jesus, one who's truth would bring us life. It's an old, old story. But not so old that it couldn't have happened yesterday. And if we believe John's truth, it's a story that can happen today, and tomorrow, and the next day.

Holy mackerel, I sure hope so!!! Amen.