

April 10, 2016
Third Sunday of Easter

Gospel: John 21:1-19

The risen Christ appears again to his disciples by the sea where they were first called. After echoes of the fishing and feeding miracles, he gives a final reminder of the cost of a disciple's love and obedience.

¹After [he appeared to his followers in Jerusalem,] Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon 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.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He 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. ⁷That 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. ⁸But 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.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So 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. ¹²Jesus 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. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When 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." ¹⁶A 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." ¹⁷He 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. ¹⁸Very 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."

One of the things that keeps me going is a refrigerator magnet at home that says the following: "Always make new mistakes." I bought the magnet at the United Nations Gift Shop on a visit some years ago.

Always make new mistakes. The saying isn't from the Bible, of course, but it nudges me toward what the Bible promises about forgiveness and starting over. For you see, if I began each day, or

ended it, thinking I have to get everything right, or everything done, I could never forgive myself for all the failures along the way. I would throw up my hands and scream, “Why even try?”

Baseball players and fishermen face the same temptation. Coming up to bat isn’t the same as hitting, and fishing isn’t the same as catching. Striking out and coming up empty are the norm. In scripture, the remaining disciples are learning the hard way about fishing all night and coming up with nothing by morning. At the least, they seem discouraged when the risen Jesus joins them on the beach. [It makes me think of our neighbor up in the mountains who used to promise us that if we went out at night to the cove next to us we would catch “the big one.” We always ended up star gazing.]

“Children, you have no fish, have you?” “No,” they admit with frustration and shame. “Cast the net to the right side of the boat,” Jesus suggests. The rest is a story of abundance, the catching of 153 fish, whatever that number means or doesn’t mean. But imagine how they must feel when their Master—the “boss” if you will—shows up and they have nothing to show for their efforts. They must be thinking: *Well, my performance review won’t go well this year, and now I’ve probably blown my chances for the annual bonus. I’ll never get a promotion, either.*

Today’s gospel proclaims another appearance of the risen Jesus to his disciples after Easter. Yet in a real sense, the story is not only about Jesus’ appearance, but also his calling his disciples to “follow me.” [The other gospel writers put this at the beginning, but John at the end.] You might say that it tells of their commissioning, or rather their re-commissioning. Remember: the last time we heard about the disciples, they had run away and abandoned Jesus. Peter, of course, had denied even knowing his Lord and the rooster had crowed.

Jesus’ call to “follow me” is really, then, an act of forgiveness, too. “Follow me” means: *It didn’t go so well the last time, did it my friends? But I haven’t given up on you, and so you are not going to get away with pleading failure! Cast the net to the right side of the boat.*

In this way, the gospel is the good news of abundance, and not only the abundance of fish (or earlier the abundance of wine at the wedding feast, or the abundance of loaves and fishes when the five thousand were fed, or the abundance of living water for the woman at the well), but now the abundance of grace and forgiveness and second chances.

As a newly arrived student intern from the seminary, I was given by my supervisor a list of one hundred people he wanted me to visit from June through August. We’re talking about door knocking, the bread and butter of evangelism and, oh by the way, all sales! Don’t forget: I am a Lutheran, and we don’t do door knocking. Oh, we might hold what you call hereabouts a “meat shoot” and hope the winners will turn their lives over to Jesus! Or maybe darken the door of your club or church.

After three months, I built up enough scar tissue from all the slammed doors in my face that I started to have fun. I even got some free meals and expressions of praise: “Isn’t the young vicar a brave soul? He seems so sincere.”

Three times Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” And with each “Yes, Lord, I love you,” those three denials that made the rooster crow the night of Jesus’ arrest are wiped away. If this is how

the Lord always deals with *our* faithlessness, why can't we try one more time and cast our nets to the other side of the boat?

In the end, resurrection, Easter, means nothing less than Jesus spreading a meal before us on the beach, a meal of pardon and forgiveness.

AMEN

The Rev. John A. Berntsen