

The Third Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2022
Sermon by Pastor Emily Rova-Hegner

The Holy Gospel according to John

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."

The gospel of the Lord.

Grace and peace to you from God our creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

He is risen!

He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

After the resurrection, Jesus has appeared to the disciples twice before the story today. He has shown himself to them in different ways and in different contexts. It is important to remember that the disciples are still full of fear, full of disbelief, full of questions and are trying to make sense of what has transpired over the past few days.

In the gospel today, the disciples gathered together by the Sea of Tiberius, and they are no doubt trying to navigate this new road of grief and loss over the death of Jesus, and the confusion over his resurrection. Peter's response is part of the human condition. He goes back to what he knows... what is familiar.. what gives him structure... what he understands, and what makes sense.

Peter announces, "I'm going fishing." Fishing. Fishing is when these guys know. It's been their life's work up to the point when they are called to leave their nets and follow Jesus. Every single day they fished. It was their life and existence before Jesus. Fishing was easy feeling the nets in their fingers, smelling the sea, touching the worn wood of the boat as they pulled it out and into shore, hearing the birds calling out, eating a piece of bread as they were on the go – were all comforts they knew.

They could probably get ready and fish with their eyes closed. Out on the water would clear their thoughts. Maybe in doing what was familiar they would find comfort and solace in the midst of grief and loss of their beloved friend and teacher, Jesus.

I love to imagine the disciples are out on the sea, going through the motions of putting the nets in and quietly waiting. It is just after daybreak, so it is still dark and the light is just slowly appearing and a voice off the shore yells out, "Children, you have no fish?" When they reply, "No," he tells them to put out their nets on the right side of the boat. The disciples do as they are told, as in, "Okay, well, what do we have to lose?" And in there lies the miracle.

The abundance of fish is too much. It's overwhelming. They can't pull them all in. Perhaps standing there dumfounded, the "Aha!" button clicks in and they realize it's Jesus standing on the shore, so Peter puts on clothes, because he's fishing naked, then he jumps into the sea to go and meet Jesus. (Because you know, it's always good to get dressed when you're about to jump in the water.)

When they bring in the boat, Peter goes to help, and they have 153 large fish. Seriously? Who thought of putting that in the gospel? 153 large fish is significant for sure. These are the pieces we fail to notice sometime, but I think what it tells us is that this was important. This was an outstanding catch.

Perhaps after they got them all in, Jesus knew it was time to eat. The disciples had been up all night and they would be hungry, so Jesus invites them to gather around bread and cooked fish to eat of the catch, and partake in the miracle and the conversation that would continue to bless them. But the story is very fragile at this point, as many miracles are. Fragile, because no one really wants to name who or what's going on in this meal that's unfolding before them. Everyone seems to be holding their breath because they know the one they love, the risen Jesus, is right there before their very eyes.

Their feelings must have been mixed together: a blending of grief and sorrow and joy. The history of what they had with Jesus, the present moment of who they are with Jesus and the possibilities of where they are going by following Jesus are laid spread out before them. After they had eaten their fill, the conversation deepens as Jesus identifies himself and poses serious questions to Peter. He clarifies what Peter is called to be and do from here on out.

The heart of this dialogue is ultimately about love and vulnerability. The very last sentence contains the ultimate call of trust. I'm going to ask you to go back into your bulletin and tell me what are the last two words that Jesus says in the gospel. Read them with me – *Follow me*.

The disciples have heard it before. These are not new words, but the words have a different meaning coming from the risen Jesus. We also know that Jesus is saying the same thing he has said before, but the ears that are hearing it are post-resurrection. Following Jesus means something different now.

Post-resurrection is baffling. I'll admit it is hard to tell someone what the resurrection is, exactly. One may not realize how it sounds until you have to explain it to someone. Many of you know that I'm a third grade teacher, and in the month of April, prior to Easter, I was getting our class weekly calendar ready for holy week and the week after. I labeled the days of Easter break and was putting in the days that we had off, which were Good Friday and Easter Monday.

One of my students who has probably never been to church and had no idea who Jesus was, came up to me and said, "What's Good Friday? And what's Easter?" Most of my students have no idea that I'm also a pastor, but I thought to myself, "Wow, Pastor Emily, this should be easy for you to explain to an eight-year-old!"

I started with Jesus and his death on the cross on Good Friday. She interrupted and said, "What Good Friday? How is that good?"

"Then on Easter Sunday Christians celebrate his rising from the dead." The words came out of my mouth, and I thought, 'My gosh, that sounds really incredible – doesn't even sound possible. Well, no wonder the disciples were processing this with so much fear and uncertainty.

This young student looked at me wide-eyed, and continued to push out more questions and more questions, to which I answered as best I could. But when she said to me, "Why did he

have to die? And why did he come back to life?" I paused for a while, and I said, "Because he loves us." But it made me think deeply about this encounter by the sea, and the third miracle encounter with Jesus.

I guess you could say that we, the collective we as a congregation, are not so unlike the disciples. When we are in disbelief and grief and sadness and sorrow, we often go back to what we know, even if it's not right. We plunge right back into it because it is familiar. We hold on to those things of the past which are not always bad, but ultimately do not allow us to live in the present and the future.

I continue to ponder these things in my occupation as a teacher, but we can all see it from our own perspective. Think about COVID and how it has deeply changed us, as a society, a community, a church and individuals. It has drastically altered our lives. We live, or continue to live with masks. We've lost and buried loved ones because of it. We ourselves have been sick with it. We are more conscious of washing our hands, of touching, of hugging or being around or near other people. We thought about the vulnerable and those who are at risk and changed all sorts of things to accommodate the risk of the transmission of this illness. We are not necessarily post-COVID, although I know many people would like to be, but we cannot go back to the way it was before. We've learned too much. We've experienced too much. We've lived and lost too much.

Our ministry in the world has to be different because the post-resurrection Jesus says to each one of us, "Follow me." And as much as we want to go back to what we once knew, and who we were, it's not possible.

Peter who went back to fishing found himself in the midst of something he never expected. Going back to what was, was not possible, and a third miracle encounter with Jesus led him into the future. Post-resurrection Jesus breaks into and shows up in our lives too. Like Peter, he invites each one of us to follow him, too. But it requires trust and vulnerability, like Peter.

The story of God's love doesn't stop when Jesus dies or is resurrected. But it continues. Like changed Peter, we are changed too. We are called to be the continued storytellers. The ones who must share the good news and bring the message of God's hope and love to a broken, aching world. We are the ones who, when asked about the death and resurrection of Jesus, are called to remind all people through our words, and more importantly through our actions, "because he loves us." That is the best post-resurrection Easter news there is. Amen.