

What's Next

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May 5, 2019. After Jesus' disciples witnessed his ministry, arrest, trial, execution, and resurrection, they went home and went fishing. What were they supposed to do next? Jon Heerboth preaches from John and Acts on how Jesus got the disciples' attention and ours, and tells us what he needs us to do next.

*** Transcript ***

On Easter Sunday here, we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ with many hallelujahs, we sang our favorite Easter hymns, and we felt that our world was full of new life — new life in Christ as well as the new life of springtime. But today is the third Sunday after Easter. It's still Easter, but this Sunday feels a lot different than the week before last, doesn't it? There may not be a "Hallelujah Chorus" today. And I think that's the only singing you're going to get from a choir. But we will still be talking about the resurrected Christ and finding God's will for us, as we wait in the meantime between the First Coming and the Second Coming of Jesus. Last Sunday we heard how Jesus appeared to the disciples, and Thomas was there the second time. And he saw the holes, he felt his palm, he saw the wound in the side and said, "My Lord and my God." And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are those who," like you and me, like all of us, "have not seen and yet have come to believe." And then after that, John wrote that book so that its readers would come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing would have life in his name. And then that was the end of the book of John in chapter 20. Well, it would have ended anyway, except that there's an epilogue — one more thing added to the book. And that is today's gospel lesson. Now, the purpose of an epilogue is to treat unfinished business. And most of it, according to the Gospel of John, revolved around Peter. There was unresolved tension with Peter and Jesus, and the other disciples, and there was a lot of confusion among them about what they were supposed to do next.

They had witnessed the risen Lord. And they, like us, were experts in the teachings of Jesus. And they, like us, had received the great commandment to love one another. And yet, the disciples seem like they were all dressed up with no place to go. Moreover, Peter was still agonizing over his treacherous denial, while his master was being interrogated and humiliated by the high priest of the Jewish Supreme Court. So it looks like, after hiding out in Jerusalem for a while, Peter and some of the others went home to Galilee. Maybe they thought they would be safer there. Maybe they were out of money, or were tired of waiting for something to happen. But at any rate, they went home. So the disciples witnessed the ministry, arrest, trial, and execution of Jesus. They found out about the resurrection. They met the risen Christ twice before in this gospel. The disciples had all the evidence they need to confirm that Jesus had died and risen from the dead. And how did they respond to these monumental events? They went fishing.

They went fishing. Now, this wasn't some weekend camping trip or a little vacation after a rough patch at work. They went fishing because that's who they were: fishermen. They went home to Galilee, and picked up where they left off when they left to follow Jesus. Galilee was home at least to four of them: James, John, Peter, and Andrew. Jesus called them from their lives in the boats and called them to go fish for people. They followed Jesus, from Galilee to Jerusalem. They listened to Jesus teach, and watched him heal the sick and work miracles. They were with Jesus at the Last Supper. They were around when he was arrested and crucified, and witnessed the resurrection. After all that, they returned home. They picked up their lives where they left them off months or years before, and then they went back to work. There was no one to tell them what else they should be doing.

In a way, we were like that after Easter Sunday. We celebrated, worshipped, had breakfast, and went back to our daily lives. But today's gospel lesson is set on the beach. When the people came home, I'll bet they endured ridicule from their neighbors. "Look who's back: the grand adventurers, the glorious revolutionaries. The idealists out to change the world have decided to come home after all. We always knew that their silly scheme would amount to nothing." Ever live in a small town? That's how they talk. "Love your neighbor." Who thought that was a good plan? Adding insult to injury was the fact that the disciples seemed to have lost their old touch. They had been out fishing all night and had caught absolutely nothing. When the sun began to rise, the man on the shore said, "Children. You have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No."

I'm sure that the only thing more irritating to professional fisherman than admitting failure, is receiving advice from someone who doesn't know how to fish at all. Jesus told them they should cast their net on the other side of the boat. And when they did, they had a very large catch indeed: a hundred and fifty-three fish. I'm not much of a fisherman, but that is a piece of advice I wish someone had given me along the way. Simply "cast over here instead of over there, because the fish must be somewhere else." They don't say fish are dumb. They hide from the bait. I don't know, but I know that people I know who fish don't like to be reminded of their failure, and I'm sure that this group of disciples were not happy after that night of failure.

Anyway, when they caught the fish, John recognized the man on the shore and said, "It is the Lord!" Impetuous Peter grabbed his clothes and headed into shore quickly. The rest were left to drag the boat and the heavy net to land all by themselves. Jesus said the words anyone would like to hear after an exhausting night: "Come and have breakfast." Jesus provided bread and fish for all of them. While they were sitting around the fire, Jesus approached Peter with their unfinished business. Peter had denied Jesus three times while Jesus was being interrogated. Jesus didn't blame Peter or shame him, and he didn't ask for his repentance. He asked questions. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Jesus was referring to loving Jesus more than life as a fisherman, life in the boat, Peter's life before discipleship. Peter said to him, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." 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, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt and maybe a little irritated when Jesus 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." And Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." But that was a powerful moment for Peter — the charcoal fire, three questions. Peter knew that he was making a life-changing commitment to Jesus. Jesus didn't forgive Peter. Peter had to forgive himself and come to terms with what the rest of his life was going to be. Because he was going to have to be what Jesus needed him to be. As difficult as it would be for Peter, he had to accept that he was going to have to be the shepherd from now on, because Jesus wasn't going to be there. And that would be his identity.

When God has business with us, God will find us and will get our attention, and that's what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. He was a zealous practitioner of Judaism, and was going to bring some of the followers of Jesus to Jerusalem for trial before the Jewish courts there. God had other plans both for Saul and for Ananias, the Christian in Damascus who went to help Saul but didn't want anything to do with him. But God said to Ananias, like he said to so many of us, "Go, for he's an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel." Paul needed to be what Jesus wanted him to be, and Jesus got his attention.

Paul's encounter with Jesus may be one of the most powerful images we have of bending human will to God's will. We don't expect our encounters with God to be as earth-shaking as St. Paul on the road to

Damascus. I'm sure we would like all our worship to be as dramatic as the final choruses to Handel's *Messiah*. We might like our lives to be filled with such overwhelming experiences. Life isn't like that, though. It is not all emotional highs, moments of clear vision and bright light, dramatic experiences, or religious ecstasy. Our reality is simpler and more mundane. There's a clue for us in the disciples' experience. They were going about their ordinary lives, just like we do, and when they least expected him they encountered Christ. It was profound, and yet it was ordinary. Come and have breakfast, Jesus said. These brothers in Christ shared a simple meal after a long night. There were no bolts of light from the sky. No choirs of angels. No heavenly music from the *Messiah*. There was Easter, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in the ordinary course of a morning. Easter, in the simple passing of fish and bread around the warmth of a charcoal fire. Easter, in breakfast with the risen Jesus.

That was not the end of it for the disciples, just as Easter does not end for us with the benediction on Sunday. Jesus reconciled with Peter following Peter's denials when Jesus was arrested. Jesus did not promise resurrection, celebration, or joy. He promised suffering and martyrdom. Bonhoeffer wrote, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die." Peter was crucified. And Paul, according to legend, was beheaded in Rome. In the Book of John, there is no Last Supper. That story is not there. There are stories, though, of eating and drinking with Jesus — at Cana, with the 5,000 that he fed, and on the shore here with the disciples. When Jesus was there he saw to it that there was food in abundance, wine for all the guests at the wedding in Cana, baskets of leftovers with the 5,000, and enough bread and fish for everyone at breakfast over the charcoal fire. These stories pull together much of what it means to be in relationship with Jesus. The way in which Jesus hosts meals helps us to see the Eucharist that was embedded in Jesus' life, not his death. A little different framework from the Lord's Supper might mean grace in abundance, forgiveness in abundance, salvation in the risen Christ. And that is our Easter, as we come to Christ Lutheran Church on this third Sunday of the Easter season. Jesus is here with bread and wine, offering grace and forgiveness for all of his people everywhere. Like the women at the tomb, we come and see Jesus here. We find God in each other at worship, at the table, and in fellowship. And then we go out into the world.

This is how we live out John 3:16. We understand what Jesus wants us to be. He wants us to be good shepherds when he can no longer be. We have to accept that Jesus could believe in us, and many of our people here respond accordingly. We have many shepherds here. We have people who work to feed the hungry, to find shelter for homeless people, people here who are working to protect God's creation by greening up our congregation and our communities. We have people who reach out to our community, with our facilities and with the word of God on a regular basis. We have people who come to church and volunteer their time as key people, assisting ministers, worship volunteers, people who help with fellowship and the flowers, and people who teach our children. On Sundays, we gather to celebrate the resurrection with joy. It's both empowering for us, and challenging. We are called to go forward in our lives as witnesses of faith, here at Christ and out in the rest of our lives. We know, though, how that witness has led to suffering and even death for so many of Jesus' followers.

We pray for guidance and protection, and we offer our thanks and praise to the Good Shepherd. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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