

Encounters with Jesus: Unfinished Business

John 21:1-19

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

The disciples of Jesus have a bad case of post-resurrection blues.

Yes...Jesus had risen from the dead, and he had appeared to them.

But now what?

In times of uncertainty, people return to what they know best.

That is why, when Peter announces, "I'm going fishing,"
some of the other disciples jump at the chance to join him.

As least it was something to do...something most of them were familiar with.

We, too, are living in times of great uncertainty.

We are 101 days into a presidency that has upended most of the established norms
of our political culture

We face economic stagnation at home and a variety of threats from abroad.

To cite just one example, what in the world is North Korea up to?

Whether you live in South Korea or South Portland, you are following every move
of "Lil' Kim"—

not the diminutive rap singer Kimberly Denise Jones,
but Kim Jong-Un, the dictator of North Korea.

How do we live in a world frozen by fear,
flawed by distrust
and fractured by dissension,

a world that daily seems to teeter helplessly on the edge of disaster?

This was the world faced by Jesus' first century disciples
and by his 21st century disciples.

We cannot control or contain such chaos.

We can only remain faithful and follow Jesus,
whatever comes our way.

II

So here in the 21st chapter of John we have a final encounter with the risen Lord—
a fishing trip and breakfast on the shore.

New Testament scholars have long seen chapter 21 as a later addition to John,
perhaps because John's community was unsettled about how things had
ended for Simon Peter—

his three denials of Jesus still ringing loudly in their collective
memory.

There may also have been questions about the fate of the Beloved Disciple—
rumors that he might not die,

but would be taken straight up to heaven, ala Elijah.

So John 21 was appended to chapters 1-20 in order to answer those questions.

The community of faith that preserved and circulated the gospel written by the
“Beloved Disciple” recognized that this final encounter with Jesus contained a
divinely-inspired word for their community,

and for all those who seek to follow Jesus in every age.

The unfinished business regarding Peter is finally addressed.

The failures of the past are forgiven,
but notice there is also a focus on the future.

The Beloved Disciple recognizes “the Lord” from far away,
by his voice alone—

a reminder to us of how Mary,

in the garden of the resurrection,
 recognized his voice when he called her name.

Peter responds to the announcement,
 “It is the Lord,”
 by plunging into the water and swimming to Jesus’ side.

Both these disciples demonstrate a faith without fear.

They commit themselves—
 by word (John) or by deed (Peter)—
 to confessing and embracing the risen Lord.

Before these disciples dive head-first into their commitment, however, they receive a sign.

After a futile night of fishing, they follow Jesus’ directive to cast their net off the starboard side of the boat.

Suddenly the net is full to bursting.

At Jesus’ word the disciple’s catch goes from **nada** to **not-to-be-believed**.

The full-to-bursting net holds exactly **153 fish**.

III

Down through the years Bible students and scholars have had way too much fun trying to figure out the meaning of that number.

In the 4th century, St. Jerome claimed the 153 fishes represented all the species of fish in the world,
 and so the number anticipates the inclusion of all types of people in the mission of the church.

In the 5th century, St. Augustine took a mathematical approach,
 noting that the sum of the numbers from 1 to 17 equals 153.

It’s not clear why that is important, but since 17 is the sum of 10 plus 7,

Augustine took those numbers as signifying the Ten Commandments and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

However, he also concluded that the number 153 is “a great mystery.”

Cyril of Alexandria focused on the significance of the numbers 100 + 50 + 3—
 100 representing the fullness of the Gentiles,
 50 representing the remnant of Israel,
 and 3, of course, representing the Holy Trinity.

Of course, says Francis Taylor Gench in her book *Encounters with Jesus*, which I’ve been using for this series of sermons, it is possible that the number 153 represents eyewitness testimony (assuming, she adds, that someone took the time to count the fish).

Or maybe the point is much simpler: that, miraculously, the net was not torn, even though it held a whole bunch of fish,
 far more than any ordinary catch.

You might say it was a divinely-mandated “bumper crop.”

Jesus’ disciples respond in obedience to Jesus’ word,
 and the result is unexpected abundance.

Recall that the first sign in John’s gospel back in John 2 was at the wedding in Cana of Galilee,
 when Jesus miraculously transformed 180 gallons of water into fine wine.

Now the final sign in John is a miraculous catch of fish—153, to be exact.

The net of the Gospel is to be cast in such a way that it gathers in all the peoples of the world.

Again, the message is of a huge harvest,
 one that exceeds all human expectations.

The net held and every one of those 153 fish made it to the shore.

Jesus’ final earthly act in John’s gospel is completely typical—

everyone gets included.

No one is excluded,
 cut-off,
 or left out.

Whoever jumps into the pool is welcomed into the fullness of the community.

There are lots of “fish” we would like to cut loose these days.

Slit the net and let them go.

But Jesus’ final “harvest” in John’s gospel does not let a single fish slip away.

His invitation is to ALL nations,
 all “fish,”
 all persons,
 regardless of who they are or where they come from.

That is our discipleship directive:
 take the message of the Gospel everywhere,
 knowing that the net will always hold.

IV

In John’s gospel we’ve seen a number of provocative conversations:
 Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night;
 the Samaritan woman at the well;
 the woman accused of adultery;
 Martha and Mary when their brother Lazarus died.

Now we have one of the most powerfully moving conversations in all of Holy Scripture.

When Jesus is finished grilling the fish and bread for breakfast,
 it's time for him to grill Peter.

When Jesus questions Peter three times about his loyalty,
 John gives us a rare glimpse into Peter's emotions.

"Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?'" (v. 17)

I suppose he felt two times were justified, but not three.

Of course, Peter didn't limit himself to denying Jesus twice.

Did he recall, not many days before, how he had denied three times even knowing the Lord.

On the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter stood in the courtyard of the house of the high priest.

Someone said to him, "Aren't you also one of this man's disciples?"

Peter said, "I am not" (John 18:17).

Not once,
 not twice,
 but three times,
 Peter denied that he even knew the Master.

I can only imagine the depth of the guilt and remorse Peter was feeling.

Now Jesus asks Peter three times:

"Do you love me...do you love me more than these?"

And three times Peter answers,

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Each time Jesus says to him,

*"Feed my lambs...
 Tend my sheep...
 Feed my sheep."*

There are few things in life quite as satisfying as to be able to say, "I told you so."

You know or see or understand something no one else does and you warn, “Don’t do that.”

But they do it anyway, and what you predicted would happen, happens, and you can say “I told you so” and it feels *so good*.

What do they call it in the German language: *schadenfreude*?

And Jesus didn’t do it...Jesus doesn’t engage in *schadenfreude*.

Who could resist at least reminding Peter that Jesus predicted his denial?

Who could resist at least a gentle reminder that a terrible betrayal had happened?

But that is not the way of Jesus.

No recrimination,
 no accusation,
 not a hint of injured pride or wounded ego,
 none of the emotional manipulations you and I are so adept at.

Just “*Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep.*” Three times.

There on the beach after breakfast,
 that three-fold denial is overturned by a three-fold affirmation
 of love and unconditional acceptance.

The unfinished business of betrayal is erased by the unconditional forgiveness of the risen Lord.

Jesus forgives Peter, and gives him the chance to start again.

What happened to Peter can also happen to you and me.

V

In this scene, Jesus offers Peter and us the two things many modern psychologists contend every one of us needs:

a sense of belonging and...
a sense of purpose.

First, a sense of belonging.

We all need to feel accepted by a larger group in order to have a stable identity and sense of self.

This goes against what may seem like common sense.

After all, our culture regularly posits that identity is an individual affair, something we carve out for ourselves and by ourselves.

But it turns out that the gift of identity is given to us by those around us, as we see ourselves through the eyes of those closest to us.

And, just so we are not confused,
belonging is different than fitting in.

Indeed, it is the exact opposite (as many of us will remember from middle school!).

Fitting in is changing yourself to be acceptable to the group,
whereas belonging is being found acceptable by your group just as you are.

We all need to belong.

In this scene, Jesus asks Peter three times whether he loves him.

Three times.

Imagine if someone you care about asked whether you really love him or her not once, not twice, but three times.

Think how painful that would be.

And Peter is, indeed, hurt by this repetition.

I suspect that only later did it sink in that Jesus was not testing Peter but reinstating him to the community of believers by allowing him to confess his faith in Jesus the same number of times he denied faith in him earlier.

Jesus is drawing Peter back into a community to which he belongs and accepts him for whom he is.

Second, we all need a sense of purpose,
 the belief that what we do matters,
 that it can make a difference in the world,
 that if we did not show up, people would notice.

A sense of purpose, as it turns out, is one of the great motivators in the world.

More powerful than money or fame or power,
 believing that you have something of value to contribute draws us again and
 again into challenging circumstances with joy.

And so in response to each of Peter's confessions, Jesus gives him work to do:
 feed my sheep...
 lead my flock...
 look out for these others.

Devote yourself to this community.

Peter is reinstated into the community of the faithful and given a sense of
 belonging,
 and then he is given good work to do and given a purpose for his life—
 two things God offers to each and every one of us.

VI

So here is what this final encounter with Jesus in John's gospel leaves us with:

The Risen Christ doesn't just meet us on the mountaintops,
 like on joyous Easter Sundays.

Jesus also comes to us down at sea level,
 in our day-to-day experience,
 to give to each of us what he gave to Peter:
 a sense of belonging
 and a sense of purpose.

Jesus is always with us in times of loss and failure,

such as Peter had experienced.

We just have to be alert and keep our eyes open for him.

Cary Grant, the movie star, used to tell about how he was once walking along a street and met a man whose eyes locked on him with excitement.

"Wait a minute," said the man, "I know who you are! You're... you're... no, don't tell me, you're, you're Rock Hudson! No, you're not Rock Hudson, you're, you're ..."

"Cary Grant," said Cary Grant.

"No, no," said the man, "you're not Cary Grant! You're... you're... don't tell me, I want to guess..."

Sometimes we don't see Jesus because we are looking for or expecting someone different!

But Jesus could be present in the stranger who asks us a thought-provoking question.

Or in the coworker who asks, out of concern,
"How are you doing today...really?"

Or in our fellow church member who,
concerned for us,
calls us to make sure we come back to worship.

Jesus can be at work in the loved one or friend who encourages you to take a new perspective:

Look, you've been doing things this way for a while now. Why not try something different: a new approach, a new attitude, a new counselor?

Try putting your net down on the other side!

Jesus is always present, always reaching out to us.

We are the ones who need to move toward him.

That's what Peter did.

First he put on his clothes (he had stripped down for work).

Then Peter "took the plunge."

He jumped in with both feet and began to swim for shore!

I can imagine him flailing and splashing in his water-soaked clothes,
all the while shouting, "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!"

Despite his sins, failures, and denials,
he still loved Jesus
and couldn't wait to be with him...
couldn't wait to be forgiven by him and restored,
couldn't wait to serve him and give his life for his Lord.

According to tradition, Peter's life ended in martyrdom in Rome,
where he was crucified upside down at his request,
because he didn't feel worthy of dying the way his Lord did.

VII

Friends, we live in uncertain times, and we always will.

All of us will have times of discouragement, frustration, and even fear.

We don't always shine with the brightness of Easter faith.

But, as an old folk hymn puts it,
"Every Sunday is Easter Sunday."

The Risen Christ never leaves us.

Jesus is always patiently waiting on the shore,
waiting to point us to a better way...
waiting to show us that we belong to his flock,
and that when we follow his lead,

our lives will always have purpose.

The miracle of Easter is not that it happened once,
but that the risen Christ is still with us every day.

Howard Thurman said,

No event in your life can imprison you. This is what resurrection is about.

So I invite you today to draw yourself into that picture and experience forgiveness and pure grace and a love that will never let you go.

No matter how bad we may sometimes feel,
no matter how uncertain and chaotic the world may be,
we are never, ever back in the same old boat...
if we can just keep recognizing and heading toward
the Stranger on the shore.

He is always there.

So make it your unfinished business to plunge headlong into the grace and forgiveness of the risen Jesus.

Make it your unfinished business to embrace the commission Jesus gave to Peter.

And make it your unfinished business to follow Jesus wherever he might take you on this incredible adventure we call life.

"Every Sunday is Easter Sunday."

And that, of course, includes today.

Amen.

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