

“Gone Fishing”

**Acts 9:1-6
John 21:1-14**

**First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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This is the Epilogue, in the Gospel of John. In the aftermath of the resurrection, Peter takes the others fishing. They encounter the Risen Christ there, and have breakfast with him on the beach. Jesus and Peter talk, and Jesus gives him instructions about leading the church. That sounds anti-climactic. Hollywood would have given us a better ending, would it not? There would have been signs in the sky in Technicolor, high drama, a dramatic musical score, and Jesus would have blasted off into the sky like a rocket. A back-lighted, ruggedly handsome Peter would have turned, struck a photogenic pose, and delivered stirring words to crowds of screaming thousands. (Actually, I think I did see that movie.)

We have always wanted to dress our Christianity up with razzle-dazzle; it’s never had enough glitter on it for us, in its natural state. Europe is filled with architectural wonders, the cathedrals and edifices of an earlier time, grand and gilded monuments to God. Although I guess we do that here as well, whether the cathedral is crystal, is in Salt Lake City, or is Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago!

But beyond architecture, we have a long history in our country of trying to improve on the Christian faith by spiritual posturing, and spinning off new religions (more than any other society ever has), each claiming to be the sole arbiter of truth - God spoke to them alone and gave them secret knowledge hidden from the masses, the rest of us.

Then there is the passion of over-spiritualized neophyte who cannot imagine that Christianity existed before they discovered it last week. Or there is whatever newest twist exists on evangelicalism, despising ordinary faith and wanting more emotional pizzazz, the newest and shiniest thing, in their spiritual diet. Something flashy! But of course Jesus tells us at one point, “Consider the lilies of the field; they neither toil nor spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not attired as one of these.”

This is a good season of the year to wonder about such things, because there is in the church sometimes a let-down after Easter. Friends and family have been visiting, and now are gone; the debris remains to be cleaned up. And Easter is, of course, the church’s highest holy day. Theoretically we should celebrate it all the way to Pentecost. Instead, we may have a let-down feeling. The Sunday after Easter is called “Low Sunday” by pastors, in honor of the attendance. Perhaps we want a little more glitter on it. Or to be somehow changed more than we have been.

Did the disciples feel the same way, following the earth-shaking events of the resurrection? Who can know? John tells of seven of them being gathered, and I have imagined that they, too, felt a let-down, felt a little inadequate, perhaps suspected that the moment of promise had somehow escaped them, that they had been embroiled in things over their heads, too wonderful for them. There they sit, apparently doing nothing. Were they were thinking how it could be, after all that

had happened, that life seems much as it had always been? Rome still in power, the sun a little too hot for the season, and Old Bunam down at the fish market still has crooked scales.

After the wonder of ministry with Jesus, the thrill of seeing the faithful come to the Messiah, the rush of adrenalin in the conflict with the authorities, how can everything seem the same? After death, how dare the sun come up, or birds sing? Or after resurrection, how dare the world seem ordinary?

A.E. Housman: "O, I have been to Ludlow fair, and left my necktie God knows where;
And carried halfway home, or near, pints and quarts of Ludlow beer.
And then the world seemed none so bad, and I myself a sterling lad,
Down in lovely muck I've lain, happy . . . till I woke again.
Then I saw the morning sky. Heigh-ho. The tale was all a lie.
The world, it was the old world yet. I was I; my things were wet.
And nothing there remained to do but begin the game anew."

And there we are, at the start of Chapter 21, with the disciples. An ordinary day. Sitting on the lakeshore swatting flies. What gives?

Here is where Peter does an interesting thing, and it is the right thing. Maybe he had a dose of good common sense. Peter says, "I'm going fishing." Understand that is *not* to say "I'm going fishing" in the way you or I would - recreational, take a break. This had been Peter's job, his occupation. When he says, "I'm going fishing", he is saying, "I'm going back to work." It's what he does, what he knows how to do best, he's a fisherman. The others say, "Wait; we're coming with you."

They fish all night, serious work, but catch nothing. (Any fisherman knows this can happen, but it's not the normal course of events, and if you're a professional, downright embarrassing. That's why they don't call it "catching"; it's just "fishing"!) In the morning Christ stood on the shore, and it seems they didn't recognize him at that distance and in the early light (typical of a post-resurrection appearance story). He told them to shoot the net to starboard - a small shift, but it was enough. They caught 153 fish that strained the nets. Then they recognized Jesus and Peter (not the dignified image of our Hollywood Peter), the impulsive Peter leapt out of the boat and swam madly for shore while the others brought the boat in.

John summarizes life itself in this epilogue - showing the holy in the ordinary. He reprises the whole story. The 153 fish (the number of species known to Greek zoologists then) likely represent all the peoples of the world, so this serves as John's version of the Great Commission in Matthew - "Go into all the world and make disciples." Peter, as he had done before, again comes to Jesus over the waves, but this time he swims! And maybe it is a baptism of sorts, as Peter comes to his Lord

through water. Then the disciples brought Jesus the fish which, as he had done earlier, he has multiplied, and the loaves are there as well (feeding the 5,000). And their breakfast was sacramental, as they ate with him as they had done before at the Last Supper. Doing all the things that they knew, and the things they knew about their Lord were in them.

Howard Remally:

**The first cup of coffee, in the first cup, in the first light of morning
is an almost sacramental thing, a tool of meditation.
Sounds a silly thing to say. Not so.**

**No, the first cup is a symbol of silence
Moments alone before the day comes on
With clanging gong and clashing cymbals and sometimes largely
loveless.
A quiet time for Jesus-Loves-Me-Thoughts.**

**So, lip to lip I drink, and am reminded of the time
Christ had a charcoal-broiled fish breakfast on the beach
With the Way-followers
And had a cup of coffee while Peter fretted with the coals.
Well, wished, anyway.**

It is a small shift, but it is enough. We hear of such a shift. In the Book of Acts: Saul of Tarsus, wandering the region laboring for God (or so he thinks), persecuting those he saw as God's enemies (Christians). Then he encountered the Risen Christ, and nothing was ever the same again. The shift is represented by one consonant, from Saul to Paul. Such a small thing, but it is enough. He was never quite the same, though a lot of his daily activity would look unchanged to an outsider.

Back to our John story, the disciples had returned to their secular jobs, their vocations. Doing the day-to-day things they knew how to do. Gone back to doing what they best knew how to do. And where Jesus met them was not in the razzle-dazzle, but rather in the familiar, that which was most true of them and where they spent most of their day. Within the same framework of life for them, for us, is the Risen Christ - a new depth, an added dimension, a friend and partner in life who will not ever abandon us or leave us alone . . . multiplying the results of our regular labors, multiplying the grace in our lives.

Even as adults we sometimes approach our spirituality as a small child would, waiting around for God to just show up. Peter finally didn't wait around; he went back to work. Where the presence of the Holy One is there to be had, is in the regular activities of our lives. One of the things we don't do often enough in the church is to help you ask not just what you can do for the church, but how what we do here, learn here, experience here can help you to be the best at what you do

Monday morning, Friday afternoon; how can what we do here better equip you to find the deepest meaning, indeed find Christ present, in the work you do every day, your calling?

Norman MacLean says, in his book A River Runs Through It, describes flyfishing as “an art, and art comes by grace, and grace does not come easy.” After the resurrection, we return to our “fishing” (our work) in the waters of the world. But it is still, after all God’s world. In that same book, the Father in the tale, a Presbyterian minister, is asked by his son, one day on the Big Blackfoot River, what he is reading. “A book,” he says. (It’s Greek New Testament.) “A good book. “In the part I was reading it says the Word was in the beginning, and that’s right. I used to think water was first, but if you listen carefully you will hear that the words are underneath the water.” We return to the world and our work and *our* waters, but it is a world that has shifted - shifted just enough. The Risen Christ is in it with us, and nothing is ever quite the same.

The discipline of ordinary work can be *spiritual* discipline. Believers all have a holy vocation – to be full-time Christians, so that the priesthood of God will be found in every workplace, in every boardroom, at every drafting table, every classroom, every workbench, every kitchen, every office and retail store, – where the friends of Jesus bring wonder to the ordinary, the people of God bring glory to the gray. Thanks be to God.