

Sermons from Parma Greece United Church of Christ

THE WORK OF EASTER

Easter-3

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John 21: 1-19

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Jesus Appears to Seven Disciples

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon 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.

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

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus 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. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus and Peter

When 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.' 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 to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He 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. Very 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.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

John 21: 1-19

In today's gospel story of breakfast on the beach, we enter further into the Easter season, and the work of Easter: working out what it means to have Resurrection set loose in the world, in the church, and in our lives.

One of the oddest experiences of Easter is that it can feel empty, after the graphic realities of Holy Week: bread broken, feet washed, thorns pressed into Jesus' scalp, crosses raised, a body laid in a newly hewn grave. Easter, by contrast, is about an absence: the body is no longer in the tomb; and we are left to work out what that means. Today's story makes it clear that one of the functions of Resurrection life is restoration of relationship, and deep forgiveness.

Peter announces he's going fishing, and several of the disciples decide to go along. In prior chapters in the gospel, Peter has denied Jesus and fled from the scene of his crucifixion. Though it's clear that Peter loves Jesus without reservation, his fear has led him to distance himself from Jesus, and we are left to imagine his disappointment with himself, and his guilt and shame.

It seems that Peter has returned to what he knows; amid the confusion and grief in the aftermath of the crucifixion, he feels most like himself aboard a fishing boat, handling the heavy nets throughout the cold night. His efforts are fruitless, though; after a night of fishing, the group has caught exactly no fish. On top of his grief, and his sense of having failed Jesus, he is now confronted with failing at something he has done all his life.

But as the dawn breaks, the disciples see a man on the shore, and they see the smoke from a small fire. The stranger calls out to them and suggests something very odd: cast your nets on the other side of the boat, he shouts across the water. Surprisingly, the disciples comply – and suddenly the net is full to bursting with fish!

Suddenly Peter realizes that he has seen something like this before: on a hillside, with thousands of people, he watched Jesus break bread and fish until they were all fed. He remembers a wedding in Cana, when water was turned into wine of the highest quality. The beloved disciple shouts: "It is the Lord!" and Peter clambers toward the shore with his heart bursting with excitement.

In fact, it is Jesus, and he invites them to come have breakfast, as though this was just a normal morning after a night of fishing. The disciples shoot looks of amazement at each other across the fire and wonder if this is real.

This story provides a bookend to the Last Supper; this "First Breakfast" changes the trajectory for the disciples from grief and confusion to purpose and mission. Everything Jesus said to the disciples before his crucifixion – and in John's gospel, he said a lot – is now coming to bear on the disciples, and their purpose.

But first, Jesus has some very specific business with Peter. It always bears repeating that Peter, in so many gospel stories, is a stand-in for us. His enthusiasm, awkwardness, lack of understanding, and enormous love for Jesus are just like our own. So when the gospel story focuses on Peter, it's fair to say that we are also a part of the story.

Before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus told Peter that he would deny him, and sadly, his prediction comes true. Peter is accosted repeatedly by bystanders as he waits outside while Jesus is being interviewed, and each time, he denies knowing Jesus. He is absent at the crucifixion. He is among the disciples who meet behind locked doors out of fear. Now Jesus speaks to him directly: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Jesus asks him three times, and three times Peter affirms his love for Jesus. Each time, Jesus says: then feed my sheep.

Peter is given the opportunity to undo his denial of Jesus with three affirmations of his love. Jesus tells him what to do with that love: feed the flock. Though the word “forgiveness” never appears in this story, it is nevertheless a critical theme. Peter, the impetuous, big-mouthed disciple, gave in to fear, and failed to acknowledge Jesus, failed to stick around for the bitter end. Now Peter is given the opportunity to face his risen Lord and begin again – in the words of Hymn 304, “forgiven, loved and free.”

And this story offers some of the deepest implications of Resurrection for us: we are forgiven. We are invited to start over. We are completely loved. And we have a job to do. This isn't only Peter's story; it's our story, too. When fear holds us back, love calls us forward. When we feel trapped by the way things have always been, Jesus invites us to cast our nets on the other side of the boat – change our perspective, in light of the Resurrection.

So, what does this mean for you? Are you held back from the abundant life Jesus promises by guilt, shame and fear? If you understood yourself to be completely forgiven, completely loved, and completely free, how would that change the choices you make about your work? Your money? Your relationships? The light of resurrection, shining into us, invites us to look clearly at how we have made choices out of fear rather than love, and to move away from the fears that bind us.

The implications of this story also resonate in our faith communities: Are we making choices about budget and mission based on our fear of failure? Our guilt for past failures? Or are we pointed forward, with the light of the Resurrection at our backs? If we are completely loved, completely forgiven and completely free, what does that imply about how we are to feed the flock?

We are called not only to proclaim God's love, known to us in Jesus, but to act on it. That means setting aside fear, and the way fear binds us into small lives; and embracing love as the basis of every action we undertake.

God's love, set loose in the world in the Resurrection, needs our hands and feet and hearts to make it concrete in our place and time. Like Peter, we're invited to change our perspective, and cast our nets where the love of God is available for us and there's plenty for everyone.

Jesus invites us: Come and have breakfast.

In the morning light of Resurrection, there is no room for guilt and fear.

We are forgiven, loved, and free, and we have some sheep to feed.