

## ***Encountering the Risen Christ***

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson

Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church

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### **New Testament Lesson: John 21:1-19**

NRSV

<sup>1</sup> After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but they did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." <sup>6</sup> 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 was so many fish. <sup>7</sup> 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 sea. <sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." <sup>11</sup> So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. <sup>14</sup> This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

<sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> 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." <sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup> 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." <sup>19</sup> (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

## The Sermon

If you've ever been absolutely paralyzed by misery -- depressed and despondent beyond belief -- sick of yourself and sick of the world, you can empathize with Peter in this story from the Gospel according to John.

Peter's experiences with Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry remind me of my reactions to taking intensive Hebrew as my first course in seminary. Hebrew, for me, was truly the course from Hell. Just about the time I would think maybe I was getting it I'd flunk another exam and go off to sulk and lick my wounds. I made myself miserable, I made Kathy miserable, I almost gave up on the whole seminary enterprise and questioned every bit of the elation I'd ever experienced during the call process.

During Hebrew I couldn't wait to get out of class to do chores that normal people do -- chores I didn't even usually like to do -- anything to make me feel a bit capable, at least, of doing *something* to make me feel at least a bit capable of coping with the life I'd somehow gotten myself into.

So it is quite easy for me to empathize with Peter. Peter had been through a course from hell....

In the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus is depicted as having a one-year ministry. He began in the Galilee, set his heart on mind on traveling to Jerusalem, and met his demise on that first visit.

In the Gospel of John, however, Jesus has a three year ministry -- illustrated by three successive trips to Jerusalem for the Passover. It was on the third Jerusalem visit that he experienced his arrest and crucifixion

Thus, to be true to John's Gospel, as this is the source of this particular post-resurrection appearance story, we can state that Peter had the wonderful yet roller-coaster-ride experience of having his whole world turned upside down by this Jesus from Nazareth... following him, on foot from one end of the country to the other, surviving harrowing boat trips, and repeatedly seeming to flunk the "Do you understand me, and do you love me" quizzes that consistently led Peter to raise his hand, call out, "I know, I know," and hope Jesus called on him -- only to subsequently give the wrong answer most of the time.

Like someone trying to learn a new language, Peter was always getting his vocabulary wrong and contracted "foot in mouth disease" on more than one occasion....

And just as Peter truly begins to love and understand this Jesus, his beloved Master is snatched from him, tried, convicted, and crucified.

Peter couldn't have expected to overwhelm both the Jewish and the Roman forces that had decided Jesus was a threat to their stability. But, imagine having to live with the knowledge that he -- bold and brash Peter -- had shown himself to be a coward. After promising Jesus he'd be with him even unto death, that he would never ever betray him, there Peter had been, sitting by a fire warming his hands, and denying that he ever knew the man.

Somehow Peter knew that if his story was ever made public, every rooster that ever crowed would serve as a reminder of his betrayal -- of his false bravado.

When I think of Peter and the other disciples after the crucifixion, I'm reminded of the story of the two friends who were sitting silently over their cups of black coffee, each sunk in

misery. Finally one of them breaks the long time of silence and with a deep sigh says, "You know.... I wish I were dead." And the other friend sighs an even deeper sigh and says, ***"If only I felt that good."***

Poor Peter needs a reprieve from his sense of shame and his failure to have been a loyal disciple, so he decides to do something he knows how to do, which was to fish.

Peter says to his friends and fellow disciples, "Let's go Fishing."

In a world turned upside down Peter is, in essence, saying "Let's see if the ordinary world we once knew is still available to us... let's see if we can get back to normal."

And his comrades agree. None of them wanted to be left alone in their misery either, and doing something was better than doing nothing.

Now the sure sign that things really are back to normal, is that they face the typical disappointments of normal life, namely they fish all night and catch nothing. Discouraged, but likely recognizing that every fisherman has days or nights such as this, they head back to the shore.

And there, waiting for them in the middle of their once again ordinary lives, they hear a voice calling to them from the shore asks the question every unsuccessful fisherman hates, namely *"Caught anything?"*

No use lying. Their boat would be ashore soon, and its empty bottom would signal to anyone on shore that their night-long efforts had been futile.

And then this voice emanating from the shadow of a man they can barely see in the dim light of dawn says, "Try casting your net on the other side."

They do, and WOW.... what a haul....

But the vast quantity of fish they now have to try to get to shore soon becomes the least of their concerns as their previously numbed brains begin to register the implications of their miraculous catch.

This is John's Gospel in which we are reading this story, so of course it's the unnamed "Beloved Disciple" who first "gets it!"

Why couldn't it be Peter for a change who gets it? But no, it's the "Disciple whom Jesus loved," -- as though he didn't love the others?

And this disciple utters in awe, "It's the Lord." And Peter can't help himself. He plunges in the water like a puppy madly in love with its master -- desperately hoping to be forgiven."

### Last Supper -- First Breakfast

What a scene. Peter thrashing ashore soaking wet. The other disciples struggling to get to shore with this huge haul of fish that may or may not be cared for appropriately once they get things untangled. And in the midst the calming yet simultaneously exhilarating voice of the One with whom they'd had a "Last Supper" a few weeks back." And now he is calling them to what might be called a "First Breakfast."

As children, when we've horribly misbehaved and wonder if we can ever be fully welcomed back into our family of birth, adoption, or foster care, there is nothing so assuring than to hear familiar sounds in the kitchen, the wonderful smell of bacon cooking, and the voice of a parent saying "Come get some breakfast."

“Really?” we want to say. “You really have forgiven me and are fixing me breakfast?” our emotions scream out. And we jump into a chair and can’t wait to chow down. As we are filling up our stomachs, we are also experiencing feelings of relief, knowing that we aren’t outcasts.

And grown-ups aren’t that much different than wayward children. When we know we’ve horribly offended, disappointed, or deeply hurt a loved one, we can’t wait for that first indication that all is forgiven, all is okay again.

And that’s the image for these disciples. “**It’s the Lord,**” showing up where and when we least expected him -- in the midst of an ordinary disappointing morning-after -- still somehow saying that of all the possible choices he could make of people to follow him and do his will, he still wants us.

**Us – you and me** — of all people.

The Risen Christ wants *us* to take the risks incumbent in “fishing” for lives that need to learn of his love; to take the risks incumbent in nurturing the sheep that are already in the fold, and those yet to determine whether or not they can ever feel safe again in a church, a place where previously they may have felt shame and guilt.

If you can't believe there is room for you within the embrace of the Risen Christ... if you don't think you're worthy.... if you don't believe that all this talk about forgiveness and grace could have anything to do with you, because you have just done too many things wrong and because you bring a whole truckload of sins with you on your journey.... think again..

Remember the net in the fishing parable from John’s Gospel this morning..... It just gathered fish without discrimination.... and John tells us that it didn't break... It could hold all that it gathered.... and so it is with the grace and love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ!

If you think about it, the church really only has one main purpose, and that is, to show and to convince EVERYONE that the Risen Christ walks in the middle of their lives... especially in the middle of their *every-day lives*.....

I know that sounds like a "Duh," but stop and ask yourself, "How many times did I acknowledge the Risen Christ in my life this past week?" "How many times did I listen for the voice from the shore?"

Without the Risen Christ in our midst, I submit to you that our worship is reduced to ceremonial play-acting rather than an act of genuine worship....

Without the experience of the Risen Christ in our midst, all of our stewardship efforts are reduced to *successful fund-raising* rather than *meaningful discipleship*....

Without the Risen Christ in our midst, our study of the Bible is reduced to theological *trivial pursuit* rather than *life-transforming knowledge*.

Peter and the others returned to their normal everyday lives, and it is precisely into the middle of those normal everyday lives that the Risen Christ stands and calls and guides and loves.....

Every Holy Week, we ask ourselves the question, "Were you there?" "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

It's a question that helps transform the events of Holy Week into events occurring in our everyday existence and experience... It's a way for us to feel all the pain and suffering.... all the love and sacrifice....

But let's not stop asking ourselves, "***Were you there?***" for only the dramatic events of **Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning, let's also ask ourselves, "*Were you there when the Risen Christ showed up again and again to the very ones who had abandoned and denied him?*"**

A Pastor tells of a time when his church theater group put on an Easter play portraying this story from John. The Pastor reports that the acting was superb.... Peter threw on his cloak and rushed with such genuine excitement in his expression, and Jesus had such an expression of love on his face as he looked into the eyes of each of them.... And the whole scene ended with Jesus embracing Peter and telling him that it was going to be all right.... The Pastor was standing in the side wings so he could see how the production was going....and he noticed a young teenager, who had moved up close to the stage.... and she was crying..... She was not part of the production... but those were real tears streaming down her face.....

And the pastor said, "I was envious of her. **For most of us, it was a performance.... for her it was the real thing....** She was there and Jesus was Risen and Real and Ready to love her too...

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the Gospel lesson for today isn't just about what happened to Jesus and his disciples a long time ago. This Gospel lesson is here to tell us that we are not uninvolved spectators reflecting on past events....

It is here to remind us that we never say, "Christ WAS risen," but rather we say, "Christ IS risen!"

We say that because *only then* do our Easter "alleluias" make any sense.

In a remarkable sermon, the Rev. Susan Sparks – a Southern-bred woman who was formerly a trial lawyer and is now senior minister of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City – states:

*There have been Elvis sightings all over the world--from a spa in Tokyo to a Burger King in Michigan. There was even a woman who claimed that she found the image of Elvis in a taco shell.*

*If only we'd put even 1% of that kind of energy towards looking for Jesus, we might actually find him too. Maybe we'd find him in the eyes of a little child or the downcast gaze of a homeless stranger. Maybe we'd find him in the face of an enemy or the tears of a loved one with whom we are fighting. If you believe he lives, you'll act like he lives. You'll look for him and you'll find him.*

And just maybe, the next time we celebrate Communion we will be able to hear Jesus whispering in our ears... "**Come and eat. It's all going to work out. You are loved, you are forgiven, you are my chosen one.**"