

“BREAKFAST ON THE BEACH WITH JESUS”

John 21:1-14

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Introduction to the scripture:

This 21st chapter of John’s gospel is usually understood to be a kind of appendix. At the end of the previous chapter, we read, “now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” That sure sounds like a conclusion! But then there is this: one more story about the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples. Most scholars seem to believe it was not written by the same person who wrote the rest of the gospel, but you could debate that. The style and vocabulary are different, but in its details and symbols, this chapter has very specific connections to the themes of John’s gospel. In the reading of it, pay attention for details that seem familiar from other stories. But also pay attention to the mood or feeling, to how it changes in the course of the story, and to how we see Jesus here.

Read John 21:1-14

There is just something about this story that draws me in, makes me want to be there. All the resurrection appearances told in the gospels – especially John’s gospel – have a rather intimate quality about them. But this one feels a little different. A little *more* personal, perhaps.

As it begins, the disciples seem to be kind of at loose ends. Unlike with the other resurrection appearances, we have no indication of time here. John tells of the disciples seeing the risen Jesus on two other occasions when he suddenly appeared among them in a closed up room. The first time was the evening of the day they heard from Mary Magdalene the news he was alive, the second was a week later. But now – is it days later? weeks? We don’t know, nor do we know what these disciples have been doing in the meantime, except that these seven have returned from Jerusalem to Galilee, where most of them came from. It’s hard to tell if they are still not sure whether they can believe that Jesus is alive, or if they don’t know yet what this means, or if they are just waiting for some direction as to what to do next. At any rate, Peter – who doesn’t seem very good at sitting around – says, “I think I’ll go fishing,” and his friends are immediately on board (literally!). It seems to me that they are all eager to be doing something, anything.

If going fishing seems to us like an odd response, we should remember that for at least some of these folks, fishing was their work and their life before they started following Jesus. And we should also remember that they have been through unspeakable trauma, a whole range of disorienting emotions, and the sudden interruption of the life they’d been living for the past three years as Jesus’ closest companions. I can only imagine how bruised and exhausted they

must be in this moment – mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually. I can well understand that they aren't quite ready yet for whatever is to come next. It makes a lot of sense, really, that they would return home, that they'd pull together and support each other, and go back to what they knew... and that was fishing.

So it must have been pretty disappointing – disheartening - that in a whole night of fishing, they caught exactly nothing. It seems to us – and must have seemed to them – perfectly emblematic of where they are at this moment.

Then Jesus shows up. Either because he's too far away or it's not light enough yet or they aren't expecting to see him, they don't at first realize it's Jesus speaking to them. We might expect him to ask why they're fishing, but he seems to understand. What's more, he seems to sympathize with their discouragement. He tells them where the fish are, in fact, and for some reason they listen to him. Suddenly, the empty net is so full of fish they have a hard time hauling it in. It's only then that one of them, the one who is referred to as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," says "It is the Lord!" Peter jumps out of the boat to go to Jesus. And the rest of them follow, bringing in the boat and the catch.

I can't make up my mind how to think about this story. Luke tells a similar story in his gospel, set early in Jesus' ministry, and there, it reads as a miracle meant to show Jesus' power over nature. But here it feels more personal, more of a message to these disciples of his. Maybe Jesus is letting them know that their efforts, no matter what it feels like, are not in vain – yet at the same time, everything does not rest on what they do. When their nets are empty and their spirits depleted, Jesus meets them, with an abundance. Even when they don't recognize his presence or understand what's happening, he's there to help them. It's a moment of grace.

Is this about fishing, their livelihood-in-the-world work? Or this about the work these disciples have done and will do for the kingdom of God? You'll remember that Jesus once called these men away from their boats, said to them "I'll make you fish for people." Does this story suggest that they are about to be called away from the boats again, to continue Jesus' mission? It's hard to tell whether to think of the fish (153 of them, we are told, which might only mean "a lot") as *fish* or as the people Jesus will gather into the church, with the participation of these disciples who will be sent out on that mission. Either way, the message is the same: I will meet you where you are. Do not lose hope. God will provide what you need. Grace is abundant.

But there is more to the story, and fish feature prominently in the second part of the story, too. When the disciples get to shore, they see "a charcoal fire" with some fish and bread grilling, and Jesus says, "come and have breakfast." What? Jesus has apparently cooked breakfast for them while they were out on the water. Who knew Jesus could cook?! Did he catch the fish and bake the bread, too?? We don't know, but there is something about Jesus fixing breakfast for these friends who have been through so much with him, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And maybe it is. Maybe we just didn't see it. This isn't our usual picture of Jesus, but it tells us more than reams of words about the tenderness of his love and care for his friends. It's a resurrection appearance, but Jesus is less like a conquering hero here than like a

mother who just wants to make sure her loved ones have a good breakfast before they head out into the day.

Pay close attention to this part of the story, and again you'll hear echoes of things you've heard before. This isn't the first time Jesus has fed people with fish and bread. All four gospels tell about a time when he fed a huge crowd with just a few loaves and a couple of fish (by this same lake, in fact). This is a quieter meal – all the more so because his friends don't quite know what to say. But we are reminded of what we already know: that Jesus believes in feeding people, nurturing people, breaking bread and sharing a meal together. Again, the message here has a more personal tone: Come and eat. Let me feed you. You are loved. There's a place for you. Rest here.

I love to imagine Jesus and his seven friends sitting around the fire, passing the bread, divvying up the fish. I can almost feel the warmth from the coals, so welcome in the chilly early morning, and smell the freshly cooked fish and the toasty bread. I can picture the mist rising from the lake as the sun rises. But there is more going on here than camaraderie and a good meal in a pleasant setting. A tiny detail you might not have even noticed gives us a clue: the text tells us that the fish and bread are on a *charcoal* fire. There are two "charcoal fires" mentioned in the New Testament. The other one you'll find in the 18th chapter of John's gospel: it was burning outside the high priest's house after Jesus was arrested, and around that fire, Peter denied, three times, that he knew Jesus.

So this meal, around this fire, is more than fish and bread and physical warmth. It is restoration of fellowship that was broken by Peter's fear and denial. It's a place of sanctuary. It's a circle of healing. There's no wine (at least not that we are told about!) but there's a sacramental quality to this sharing of food and fellowship. The heart of it is the presence of Jesus, which transforms it all – the fire, the bread, the fish, the moment, the people – into more than the eye can see. Grace is abundant.

And yet it's so very ordinary, so undramatic. Other than the big catch of fish, nothing else very miraculous happens. There's no blinding light or astounding revelations or hosts of angels. But this is mostly how we experience the presence and grace of God, isn't it? In the gifts each day brings, the gentle nudge of the Spirit, the invitation to the table, a friend's willingness to forgive, a loved one's understanding, the waves on the shore, healing after grief.

Our experiences are different from the disciples', but we can certainly relate to the physical and mental tiredness, the spiritual depletion, the emotional stress that comes with – and lingers after – a painful time. We know what it is to feel that we have tried hard and failed to see results. We know what it's like to have lost our courage or let someone down or failed to do what we should have done. And we know just the ordinary realities and limitations of being human and fallible, needing rest and refreshment.

The story of the disciples' breakfast on the beach with Jesus describes a sort of pause. To be sure, Jesus will help Peter and the others to reclaim their call and purpose. (Jerry will talk about that when we read the next part of John 21 next Sunday.) But first, in this moment they need

rest. They need to be fed. They need to have their strength renewed, and they need to come back to the heart of their call – the fellowship they have with Jesus.

Surely we need this just as much. And yet, we lose sight of it sometimes. Maybe that's because our culture – and even the culture of today's church – tends to value purpose, goals, activity ... *doing* rather than *being*. I think we even read the gospels with that lens – looking at Jesus as our example. But this story offers us a different perspective. It tells us that sometimes – especially when things have been difficult – we need the pause. We need time to grieve and think. We need to rest and renew our strength and courage. We need to lean on one another and be embraced within our community. We need to help one another recognize the presence of Jesus, whenever and however he shows up. We need to be recalled to the heart of our faith – fellowship with Jesus. We need to simply *be* in the presence of Jesus, sit a while with him on the beach or wherever, hear his voice, let him nourish us. Wherever Jesus meets us, grace is abundant, and that grace for me, for you, for us all. Amen.

Resources:

Essays by Louise Lawson Johnson, Rohun Park, and S. Brian Erickson in *Feasting on the Gospels, John, volume 2*.