

Just After Daybreak

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II Corinthians 4:1-6

John 21:1-19

“Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.”

How does anyone ever know that this living and breathing stranger calling to your sorry self from the shore just after daybreak is the one who was crucified, dead and buried? Thomas, you will remember from last Sunday, was the disciple who refused to believe until he beheld the mortal wounds that identified the man standing before him as the same man who was really dead--and now is truly alive. “My Lord and my God!” Thomas exclaims at the sight; says Jesus to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet who have come to believe.” In the world created by the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the world for which we were made, the question on the second Sunday after Easter is whether we will come to believe--without having seen--that the One who was crucified, dead, and buried, is alive.

But in the world where we have gone fishing, the world where we believe we must live on bravely, honestly without him, death and not life rules the day; fear and not love stalks us in the night watches. Here in the week just past, the question has been turned inside out: what will convince those over whom death still has dominion that a mad man, who claimed to hold the power of death over us, is no more? What but the image of his mortally wounded and lifeless body made public and accessible to the eyes of the world, some said. No need to see this now, of course, given the word of terrorists that finally trumped the testimony of eyewitnesses.

Nevertheless, this is the world of John’s 21st chapter. By now it should come as no surprise to you that it is night when Simon Peter says to the disciples, “I am going fishing.” Believing that darkness had overcome the light, death had overcome life, time’s inexorable march toward the grave had trumped the invasion of time by eternity, so say they all. Why not? What else is there to do until we lie to die? All seven went out and got into the boat, according to John, but that night they caught nothing. The sentence is laden with more than meets the literal mind. This is not simply a story about the life of seven mediocre fishermen; it is the story of the life of the church in the time after the Resurrection. It is our story.

The clues are not difficult to decipher. From the beginning, the boat has been a symbol for the church. To wit, the place where you are sitting right now is called the nave and takes its name from the Latin root *navis* for ship. Moreover, according to New Testament professor Sandra Schneiders, “By the time this Gospel was written, the use of the image of fishing for the pastoral ministry of the church was common.” Finally, the occupants of the boat are seven in number—perhaps not unrelated to the seven churches later addressed in the Book of Revelation--seven being a number of fullness. The whole church was present. But that night, Jesus was not. He was as good as dead to the church. “...the fact, that Peter and the others go fishing,” Schneiders points out, “that [they] seemingly return to their ordinary occupations [like the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke’s gospel], indicates that they have not yet come to faith in the resurrection.”

It is worth stopping here for a moment, in the dark, in the nave, adrift on the sea,

most of us having returned to our ordinary occupations (including the minister), indicating that we have not yet come to faith in the resurrection. In the boat, no doubt, there are some who have not seen and have no interest in coming to faith in the resurrection: who think a community dedicated to the ethics and teachings of Jesus a sufficient condition for climbing on board and being counted in the number who first were called Christians. I would say that it is a starting place, a place that might one day find you surprised by this stranger on the shore who turns out to be Jesus.

Also in the boat are those who have not seen and have come to believe in the church's doctrine of the resurrection: who think orthodoxy—strict adherence to the certainties of religion—is a necessary test to determine who belongs in the boat, both now and eternally. Much as you know I believe theology matters, I would say this is a place that will find you in opposition to the unorthodox, uncleanly stranger calling to you from the proper distance you keep—this stranger on the shore who turns out to be Jesus!

But a living Lord is neither sufficient nor necessary in order to lead an ethical life or an orthodox life. A dead martyr will do for the former and a dead doctrine will do for the latter. In either case, we are left in the boat without him, in the dark, adrift with only ourselves to proclaim, to borrow Paul's words to the Corinthians. No wonder we catch nothing!

Perhaps, then, on a Sunday night there is something to be said for simply going fishing with a ragtag group of sorry selves who are disaffected, disillusioned, disappointed in the trappings of religion and ready to give up on God. So you spend the night sitting in the dark and in the silence with no expectations. So you get up the next night and do it all over again. At least you are together and, who knows? God knows! You wait. *Just after daybreak*, writes John, just after the barest light has begun to push back the darkness, the voice of a stranger on the shore startles you and addresses you by stating the obvious: not a single soul has been brought into the boat. No matter your use of sustainable fishing techniques or your unbending devotion to the way it has always been said and done, the truth is, without him, you can do nothing.

What the stranger says next to the startled boatload ["Cast your nets on the other side"] has mostly been mistaken for technique: sign on for the Missional Church program or become a Purpose-Driven Church or attend the Engaging Church conference in order to grow, to survive, to be successful. But listen again. John's point is not so much how the crew does what they next do—Jesus is not a magician sharing his secrets; it is with whom and by whose word and under whose authority they do what they do. Not alone but directed by the word of their living Lord, even though they did not yet know it was Jesus, they cast their nets around a multitude literally dying to be caught by his love. That multitude swirls around this boat still!

Then one among the seven identifies the voice of the stranger as the living voice of him who was crucified, dead and buried: "It is the Lord!" exclaims the apostle, the eyewitness who could be trusted. The whole of the church's witness is contained in the Beloved Disciple's words. On the basis of that witness, another, namely Peter, jumps in the water. "Peter's action has little point," in relation to the story, notes Schneiders, "but the coming to Jesus through water in response to a proclamation of his identity" brings to mind the waters through which many in this nave have come to faith who were born anew by water and the Spirit! The rest of the church, says John, follows behind Peter in the boat, bringing with them all those who had been caught just after daybreak, just as the light had begun to push back the darkness, just as Jesus appeared, even though they did not know it was Jesus.

Finally fishermen and fish together arrive on the shore where Jesus is, 7 disciples and 153 souls hauled out of the waters of baptism and held in a net, with none lost, because the net was not torn—the church was not divided. The stranger invites them, no questions asked, to the meal he has prepared for them, saying “Come and have breakfast.” There, in the breaking of bread, they come to believe the stranger is Jesus, is the one who was crucified, dead and buried—and is alive: they come to believe in the resurrection. It is a belief marked not by certainty but-like Mary’s believe that the gardener who called her name was her living Lord-it is belief marked by astonishment. Yet they did not dare ask him who he was, because in the intimacy of this humanly inconceivable meeting they knew it was the Lord.

Again we would do well to pause and trace over our lives the life of the early church in the wake of the resurrection: their hearing of his voice, their obedience in response to his address (not knowing it was he), their trust of the apostolic witness which is now the witness of Scripture, their plunging into the waters of baptism, all these impossible possibilities leading them, as many here have been led, to recognize the stranger on the shore, in the breaking of bread, as their living Lord. Are these not the means of grace we have been given, from the beginning of the post-resurrection church until now, means given to those who must believe without seeing, means of proclaiming not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, to the end that our children and our children’s children may come to live, in this death-dealing world, as though death has no dominion?

But this is only the beginning! Once breakfast is over, Jesus zeroes in on Peter, the one who is to lead the post-resurrection community, the community that now can only believe without seeing. Ironically, Jesus speaks to one who did see him and yet who denied that he ever knew him. “Simon son of John,” Jesus asks, “do you love me [*agapas me*] more than these?” In Greek, *agape* is the self-giving, self-emptying love of God, an act not dependent on affection. To put it bluntly, Jesus might as well have asked, “Will you die for me?” In response Peter says, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you [*philo se*].” *Philia* is the love between friends or more formally, “a preferential bond based on mutual attraction.” To put it honestly, Peter could have said, “Yes, I really like you Jesus and I will be your friend forever.” Again Jesus asks if Peter *agapas me* and again Peter responds, *Philo se*. A third time Jesus asks of Peter only the love he is able to give: *Phileis me*? asks Jesus. *Philo me*, Peter insists. But then Jesus goes on to tell Peter he will love him in this way: he will lay down his life for his friend. *Agape*! Then Jesus says simply “Follow me!”

Beginning with Peter, coming to believe in the resurrection has meant coming to believe death has no dominion, no power, no hold over your life because, in life and in death, you belong to him whom death could not hold nor the grave conquer. In this time filled with so much to fear, he comes to us in the stranger the world would have us fear, the outcast the world would have us hate, the weak the world would have us revile, the poor the world would have us despise. He who is alive comes to us. *Agape me* in these, he commands us after breakfast: lay down your life for these.

As we ordain and install new leaders of this congregation today, I pray more and more that his living presence will be made manifest here among this gathering of sorry selves, among those who have hauled ourselves and our children out of bed and into the nave to listen for his word calling to us, even though we may not know it is Jesus. Because, who knows? He may yet surprise us in ways that only a person who is alive can. If he does, may he find us feeding his lambs; tending his sheep; feeding him sheep, following him! Thanks be to God!