

Fishing Naked
April 14, 2013
John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 3Simon 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. 4Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 6He 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. 7That 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. 8But 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. 9When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12Jesus 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. 13Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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

As Mary clung to Jesus in the garden of resurrection Jesus told her not to hang on to him. Instead he announced his departure. "Go tell the disciples I'm leaving," he told Mary. Only Jesus doesn't leave right away, he hangs around for a while to do some important transitional work. He shows up that night entering the upper room where the disciples are gathered. He greets them saying, "Peace be with you. As the father sent me, so send I you." He fills them with the Holy Spirit so they can carry on the work of Jesus after he departs.

End of story....but wait! There's more.

One of the disciples missed out and needs to see Jesus for himself. After Thomas touches the wounds of Jesus he believes. Jesus offers his blessing to all those who believe without seeing.

End of story....but wait! There's more.

Jesus can't go just yet because he has some unfinished business to tidy up. It has to do with Peter. Jesus can't just take off into the clouds while Peter is still beating himself up for denying Jesus three times. What kind of leader is Peter going to be if he feels like a failure from the get go? Jesus renamed Peter the Rock, but so far he has not been very rockish. So Jesus finds Peter and a few of the disciples fishing in the Sea of Galilee, which is odd because Jesus didn't send them out to fish. "So send I you," was their call to ministry, not, "so go fishing."

Were they stressed out and just needed to take a break? I get it. They had just been on an emotional roller coaster ride. I could see why a little time off might be in order. But really, do people who fish for relaxation stay out all night and fish with big nets? Is it possible they have gone back to their old lives? They knew how to fish, at least they used to know how to fish...but they weren't so sure about carrying on for Jesus. Maybe the old rut back to the Sea of Galilee was a much easier path than setting off in a new direction.

So the disciples fish all night long, but the night is a bust. The net keeps coming up empty. Some wise cracker on the shore adds insult to injury by hollering, "catch anything? Why don't you throw your net off the other side of the boat – the right side."

You know when you are tired and frustrated and done everything you know to do the last thing you need is someone offering advice. But sometimes you go ahead and do what is suggested just to make that person shut up. Seriously, don't you think the disciples tried fishing on both sides?

Yet, they try it. One last cast of the net, on the right side of the boat. Sure enough the net fills to capacity with large fish and they realize that's not just any wise cracker, its Jesus hollering from the shore. So Peter puts on his clothes to jump in the water, because he had been fishing naked. It makes you wonder doesn't it? Why would someone fish naked? Even more curious, why do we need to know this?

Peter is so anxious to get to Jesus he jumps out of the boat where Jesus has a charcoal fire going. He asks Peter to pick out a few fish and Jesus cooks up breakfast for his disciples, a breakfast of bread and fish. And by this charcoal fire, Jesus has a little chat with Peter. Three times he asks Peter, "Do you love me?" and three times Peter says, "yes." After each "yes" Jesus instructs Peter to feed Jesus' sheep. His last words to Peter are "follow me."

End of story....Jesus can finally leave. Peter is set straight. The gospel will go on. Ministry will continue.

This story is full of interesting details! The first one to get your attention is that Peter is naked. Lots of people, even some translators have tried to soften the starkness of this a bit by giving him underwear, but the word is naked. In fact it is quite possible that they were all naked. Some think it is because clothes got in the way and got ruined when they fished, so they took them off.

It paints quite a picture doesn't it? There is a wood carving from the second century that depicts a boat of naked men fishing, so it is quite possible. But why is that detail in this story. Does it have to do with shame? Peter, like Adam in the garden of Eden is exposed before God; both his sin and his skin. He quickly throws on his clothes and jumps in, just like he jumped into following Jesus the first time without fully understanding what it might cost to follow Jesus.

Another detail is the number of fish in the net, exactly 153. No one knows for sure why that number is important, but I'm guessing it was a lot of fish. Jesus' first miracle in John is turning an enormous amount of water into wine. His last miracle is filling a fishing net to overflowing. Both miracles along with the feeding of the five thousand point to abundance – overflowing abundance.

We know the fire was a charcoal fire as was the fire Peter warmed his hands as he denied knowing Jesus at all. Three times he denied. And three times Jesus asks by a charcoal fire, "Peter, do you love me?" For every "no" he said on that horrible night, he says "yes." And we learn that to love Jesus means to shape one's life according to Jesus' life – loving like he loved, caring like he cared, serving like he served, healing like he healed, forgiving, like he did with Peter. With every "yes" Peter is pledging his life to do just that.

If it wasn't clear the first time Peter decided to follow Jesus, it is crystal clear now. To follow is to love who Jesus loves, to love like Jesus loves, to love because Jesus loves. To love Jesus is to be overwhelmed by the abundance of God's love and abundantly share it with a world that needs love.

If we forget that we are like a bunch of naked guys in a fishing boat – catching nothing. The church is for equipping God's people to do God's work...to feed and tend Jesus' sheep. Even churches, like Peter, can go fall back into comfortable ruts and need redirection. It's a comfort to know that Jesus is willing to seek us out, break bread with us, forgive us when we lose sight of what is important, and send us on our way again. In fact, that is what Jesus does with us every week.

Fish on the right side of the boat. Feed my sheep. Follow me.