

FORGIVEN, LOVED AND FREE
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Text: 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. 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 sea. 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 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.

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."

This morning Jesus serves the disciples breakfast on the beach, and as they sit around eating and talking, we have an opportunity to think about the work of Easter and what it means to have the reality of resurrection set loose in the world and in our lives.

One of the odd things about Easter is the fact that after Holy Week it can seem kind of empty. The stories of Holy Week have so much texture to them. They're full of images we can see and hear, and touch and taste; some pleasant, some painful—crowds cheering, bread breaking, feet being washed, thorns being pressed into skin. But what we encounter on Easter is something very different. Easter is about an absence, a void. The tomb is empty, the body is missing, and we're left staring at a pile of discarded linens wondering what to make of it.

Well, the gospel reading today gives us some idea. The story of the risen Jesus feeding the disciples on the beach makes it clear that resurrection is about forgiveness and reconciliation.

After a long and turbulent week that started out with so much hope and ended up with so much heartbreak, Peter announces he's going fishing, and he takes a few of the other disciples along with him. They all need a vacation, and that goes especially Peter. He loved Jesus with all his heart, but when the time came, he completely abandoned him. He left him to die alone because he was afraid of the same thing happening to him. It's hard to imagine how disappointed he must be with himself. It's hard to imagine how much shame he must be feeling.

So this fishing trip is more than just a vacation for Peter. It's an effort to turn the clock back and forget everything that's happened and lose himself in the past. He started out as a fisherman. That's what he did for a living before Jesus came along and invited him to "Come and see." Nowhere does Peter feel more comfortable than onboard a fishing boat, letting down the nets and hauling them up out of the water. This is where things make sense to him. This is where he knows who he is. This is where he's most at home.

But he seems to have lost his touch. After being out on the lake all night, he and the others have caught exactly zero fish. So now he's not only a failure at being a disciple, he's a failure at the one thing he thought he could do, the one thing he thought he was good at.

All is not lost, however.

As dawn breaks, the disciples see a man, a stranger, standing on the shore about a hundred yards away, and he calls out to them across the water, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They yell back, "No," and he tells them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you'll find some." So they cast the net, and to their amazement they catch so many fish they can't even get them in the boat. And in that moment of surprise and joy, the disciple identified only as the one whom Jesus loved realizes who

the stranger is. Maybe it's the sight of all those fish splashing around in the net. Maybe it reminds him of other times when he witnessed that kind of abundance—like the time Jesus fed thousands of people with a tiny bit of food; or the time he turned six huge jars of water into wine.

Whatever it is that makes the connection for him, the beloved disciple yells out to Peter, "It's the Lord!" And as soon as Peter hears those words, he forgets everything and jumps into the sea. He forgets his fear and shame, and he swims to shore while the other disciples bring in the catch. And standing there on the beach, next to a charcoal fire with some fish and bread on it, they find Jesus, who invites them all to come and have something to eat, as if it's just another morning; as there's nothing unusual about a dead person cooking you breakfast.

So the disciples and Jesus already had their Last Supper, right before Jesus was arrested, and now they're having their First Breakfast, after he has been raised. And that's on purpose. These two meals are like bookends. On the one side of the resurrection, it was evening, and the disciples were heading into a time of confusion and uncertainty. On the other side of the resurrection, it's dawn, and the disciples are discovering new purpose and direction for their lives.

And again, that goes especially for Peter. He's carrying so much baggage, more than anyone else. Three times while Jesus was on trial, Peter denied even knowing him. And when they took Jesus away to be crucified, instead of being there with him to give him some comfort at least, Peter ran and hid. He locked himself in a room with the other disciples, afraid the authorities would come for him next.

So you don't have to be the Son of God to see how weighed down Peter is. All you have to do is look at his face. He's never really been one to hide his feelings. So Jesus speaks to him directly, calling him by his given name. "Simon son of John," he says, "do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter answers, "you know that I love you."

"Feed my lambs," Jesus tells him and then repeats the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter answers again, "you know that I love you."

"Tend my sheep," Jesus tells him and then repeats the question for the third time: "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Now Peter's feeling a little hurt. "Lord," he says, "you know everything; you know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep," Jesus says one last time.

It's a strange and confusing conversation. Why does Jesus keep asking the same question over and over, and why does he keep saying, "Feed my sheep"? Even though the words don't appear in the text, what this moment is about is forgiveness and reconciliation—one person giving another person a chance to make up for the past and embrace a different future.

Three times Peter denied Jesus, and three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Jesus is opening a door for Peter and leaving it up to him whether or not to walk through it. He's presenting Peter with the same decision he was presented with before—to either stand with Jesus and accept the consequences of being his follower or walk away and live with that regret for the rest of his life.

It's basically a do-over, and Jesus is handing it to Peter on a silver plate, hoping he'll take it and be the committed, loyal disciple he knows Peter can be. And this time Peter comes through. He may not be perfect, but he knows a shot at redemption when he sees one, and he doesn't let it slip away. He grabs onto it. He affirms his love for Jesus over and over, and he sets off on a new path, one that won't be easy, as Jesus warns him, but it will be faithful.

So that's what it means to have the reality of resurrection set loose in the world and in our lives. In the words of the hymn, it means that just like Peter, we're "forgiven, loved and free." It means we're invited to set down our baggage, to leave the past behind, and start over. It means we're accepted as we are. And it means we have a job to do, and we can't let fear hold us back. We have to go out into the world and be the committed, loyal disciples Jesus knows we can be. Amen.