

Brunch With Jesus
John 21.1-25
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Easter 3C
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When you are tired and overwhelmed and exhausted and no longer able to control the rolling shore of emotions within you, sometimes the very best thing to do is step away and return to what you love. I don't know that I realized just how tired I am (have been? am?) until I started to listen to Tim Lauve-Moon describe his sermon for last week. As he brainstormed aloud in the office and told me how he feels we are too hard on Thomas because Thomas isn't perfect, I felt all the lights and flags and "ah-ha" whistles going off within me. We put our shame and perfection and judgment on Thomas who dares to be honest and flawed and good enough.

John's Gospel is particularly kind that way as Jesus keeps appearing before his friends, and no one really understands what's happening right away. And they talk themselves through these odd appearances as they're happening, "This is the Lord, right? Yes. Yes. Of course, this is the Lord. I knew it as soon as he spoke." John understands that the life and Way of Jesus are already too much to take in. John assures us that this Jesus message won't be finished all-at-once, it will be on-again-off-again. The good news of resurrection surely must wash over us like waves because we cannot bear it all at once, and we forget the impact as soon as the water leaves us on the shore.

And so it was already perfectly timed and scheduled that my husband Nathan and I would celebrate our 15th wedding anniversary, and we knew we didn't have much time to go very far. Lucky for us that we live in one of the few towns in the world where you can take a vacation just 10 minutes from your house. We set up camp on Chartres, ate wonderful food, heard some fantastic music, laughed and gawked at tourists who were thoroughly enjoying themselves, and we walked and walked for hours. My husband stills me and settles me when I am striving for perfection. He reminds me I am good. I am enough. You can't ask for much more than that.

And I think that's why this group of friends climbed into that boat to go fishing. They needed to be together but not talking about Jesus' death. They needed to be on the water but not talking about these appearances of a Jesus-who's-not-quite-Jesus. They needed to be working as a team, casting nets, drawing in lines, moving ropes, effortless in their understanding of one another. They needed to get away in a place where they were fully known and fully themselves.

If their goal is simply getting away and being together, they have succeeded. But a day of fishing is obviously much better if they actually haul in a catch even if they're in it for the experience and not the outcome. And Jesus sees them while they are far away, (another great line that we've heard so many times in recent week—people are lost and running and giving up and leaving home and standing entirely outside of their truth, yet every single one is seen and seen with from a place of great hope and faith and love—what a great little side note.)

Jesus tells them to throw the net over the other side, and then things begin to move very quickly. First, the disciples pull in more fish than they expected or needed. Immediately, they realize the helpful man on the shore is the Lord, and Simon Peter dives into the water because he is naked (not an altogether shocking detail for 1st century fishing, but nevertheless a detail that reminds me of a hiding man and woman in Genesis 3 who heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.) The scene sounds like utter chaos. Simon Peter jumping overboard, the others struggling to haul in 153 fish at once, the realization that they have once again seen this resurrected Jesus being. And Jesus calmly begins to tend a fire to welcome them ashore for a meal.

I am learning some lessons about my life right now, and this curious and frantic scene resonates with me in that process. I am someone who likes to know how the details line up, I'd prefer for my life to be all-at-once rather than fits-and-starts. I suspect I am like many of you, in that way. We don't want tension. We don't want discomfort. We don't want unfinished business hanging over our heads. We don't want to make a big decision that could be a wrong decision. We want to control the outcomes. We don't want to fail. And if you are anything like me, we move into our shadow selves when there is too much tension, too much discomfort, too much unfinished business, too many big decisions, too great a risk of failure. Our shadow response is some version of fight or flight, but rarely is it an invitation to anticipate a miraculous act of God.

Let's be clear: just as with Thomas last week and his need to touch the hands and side of Jesus, there's no guilt or shame doled out for the disciples in this story, so there will be no guilt or shame for us. You and I need not feel guilty for forgetting that Jesus is watching and waiting on the shore, just a mere 100 yards from the boat, we must note that Jesus isn't anxious and frustrated with the disciples for the frantic chaos that erupts. He knows they've returned to a safe, familiar, restorative place because they don't trust anything else right now. He is waiting with them even though they have

momentarily forgotten him. And even when they can't imagine abundance and miracles and the holy work of their Lord, he remembers and imagines for them.

I've been sitting with this image for days now and remembering my role as pastor of this church as I think about the pendulum swing between being overwhelmed by life's details and sitting alongside Christ's fire on the shore of that sea. I've been invited to write a monthly column for *Baptist News Global* and decided I would use that space to write honest reflections from my distinct perspective as a first-call, senior pastor in a time of great transition for all churches in our country.

In my first post last week, I shared reflections of arriving at St. Charles just over two and a half years ago as I stepped into the pulpit for the very first time and preached about the uncertain future we were entering into together. What began in the Autumn of 2013 has become a season of innovation and restructuring as we anticipate what church looks like for the 21st century. On that first day, we looked at each other with hope and some butterflies and wondered if this would really all work out. We wondered if we truly believed that God might show up and give life to a new chapter in this old church's story.

In our first 30 months together, we are slowly seeing signs of what that new chapter may look like. In myriad ways, we see growth and life and new ways forward. It's exciting, it's inspiring, and every week we are surprised by new faces and new stories. Every single week I meet with someone and think, "How in the world did you end up here with me? How am I so lucky that I get to hear your story?" Some days you are celebrating new life events, and I get to cheer you on. Other days, you are paralyzed by crisis and life-altering decisions, and I get to sit along side you. Last Sunday morning, I stood before you as I served the broken bread and was steadily so moved with emotion that all I could do was offer a hug of deep gratitude for the sacred moments we share.

And at the same time, sometimes even minutes apart, a new bill will arrive or an old pipe will burst and I think, "How in the world did I end up here? Where did we leave the shop vac? How much water can the Tower hold before the corner of the building falls to St. Charles Avenue? If we just keep that door closed, can we ignore the asbestos and lead indefinitely?" We are finding our way forward in fits and starts at St. Charles. It is not an easy or smooth path toward whatever "new church" is becoming, and we surely do not have all of the answers. I do not have all of the answers. That is an uncomfortable place for me to be.

Every congregation has a slightly different story, and so many other beloved brick-and-mortar churches around the country know that circumstances and times have changed. There are empty pews everywhere, and people of faith are looking at each other and their pastors asking, "Where are we? Will we ever get back to the place where we were? How do we move forward?"

On that very first Sunday in my trial sermon, I asked those questions and then read from the prophet Jeremiah, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your own."

What will the next five years bring? The next 10? What will church look like when I'm 65? I really don't know. What I know is that today, I will plant a garden right here in New Orleans and watch what grows. And I will root my family in this place. We will give our best selves to our city and to our church, and the good friends around me will do the very same thing. And day by day, week by week, month by month, we will continue to discover that seeking the welfare of the place in which we find ourselves is the path to discovering our new story in whatever form it may take.

This fourth appearance story in John is about the ways grace surprises us when we are doing the very best we can to be faithful in the moment. Don't know what to do next? Take the boat out in the water and wait for the line to strike. Don't remember who you are? Go walk hand in hand with your beloved until you start to remember. Don't know what your next best step is? Get your hands in the soil and plant a garden.

Karoline Lewis speaks to what happens as we're waiting and walking and digging. For the men in that boat, what happens next is 153 fish. She writes, "Don't met-a-phor-ize this. And I don't care if that's not a word. What if it was really true? 153 fish? That is a crazy amount -- and why? Because that is how much God loves us.

The whole gospel of John is about abundant grace. Grace upon grace in John 1:16... What good is the incarnation if you can't touch, taste, smell, see, and hear it? So 153 fish is that very truth. This fourth resurrection appearance is to reveal that grace upon grace is true. By definition, grace upon grace cannot be restrained to a passage, to a gospel, and that's the point of John 21. To show, by a ridiculous amount of fish, that God's grace cannot be limited to the incarnation, to the crucifixion, to the tomb, to the resurrection, and certainly not to the end of a Gospel story called John.

Resurrection is abundance.”

I have forgotten this good news lately. You forget this good news, too. We will forget and fret, forget and fret, over and over and over. But the good news in this story is that God does not forget. God does not give up. God is waiting to surprise us with grace upon grace and, as Lewis continues, a heckuva lot of fish “when you least expect it, just like the wine at Cana, when all hope is gone, when you wonder what you are doing, when you think there is no future, when your well has dried up, when you doubt that grace is true, when you question if grace is for you. This is the resurrection story we need. Desperately. All of us. That we will, indeed, experience the truth of the resurrection beyond the empty tomb. That Jesus will always show up on the shore, will invite us to share a meal once again, because abundance really means abundance when it comes to God. Why? Because it seems that God truly does love the world.”¹

What comes next in your life? I do not know. What comes next for us here at St. Charles? I’m not entirely sure. We don’t have to know all of the answers right now. For today we hear the call, “Do you love me? Feed my lambs. Do you love me? Tend my sheep. Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Follow me.” It’s all we can do. Follow, fish, walk, dig, plant, and put all our chips in on grace upon grace. Robert Hoch writes, “It is almost as if by deciding to follow Jesus, we return to our true selves, beloved of God. Our lives imitate Christ’s life, our joys Christ’s joy, our heartaches Christ’s heartache.”²

Like every preacher with something to say, the final writings of John want to go on and on. The author decides to promise us that there’s even more to the story: “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” There’s so much more to this story, my friends. For today, in this sacred moment, let’s sit along side this fire with these friends and this bread and this fish and remember that God sees us, watches for us, knows us fully as we are, and is waiting to surprise us. This, my friends, is gospel. Amen.

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4583>

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2809