

**John 21:1-19 (NRSV)**

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."

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

If the dinner Jesus shared with the disciples on Maundy Thursday was the Last Supper, then this meal must be the First Breakfast. The First Breakfast of the rest of their lives, their lives After Easter. This is a perfect text for us as we come down from the heights of Holy Week.

Some of the disciples are hanging around with nothing to do, and Peter says, "I'm going fishing." No one has any better ideas so they all pile into the boat probably in the middle of the night and go fishing. Now, consider this for a second. Their Lord has been executed, but has appeared to them twice in the upper room, once without Thomas, and once with him. He has breathed the Holy Spirit onto them. Right after the second appearance, the one to Thomas that Pastor Wendy talked about last week, John's Gospel continues as follows:

"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.” (John 20:30-31).

This sounds very much like the ending of the book – at this point, the storyteller looks around at the crowd, says, “Amen,” asks if there are any questions and sends everyone home. Many scholars think that the passage I just read really is the end of John's Gospel, and that *today's* Gospel lesson was added on later.

But, before we accept this idea too quickly, we should ask, how does today's Gospel lesson help to complete the story of Jesus as told in John's Gospel? The answer, it seems to me, is obvious. Yes, Jesus is risen, yes, he has breathed the Holy Spirit into the disciples, but Jesus hasn't yet answered the big question – how are *we* changed? *He* has changed all right – he walks through locked doors, he's a master of disguise, even his own disciples don't recognize him. *He* has changed, but how are *we* changed? Peter doesn't know, so he goes back to what he does know and that is fishing.

Unfortunately, the fishing isn't so good. The men fish all night and don't catch a thing. Some guy yells from the shore – “Hey, boys, no fish, huh?” You can probably guess that the disciples were less than pleased to have to tell this guy, “No, no luck.” He calls back out to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat.” Now, these were men who fished for a living, who'd been fishing all night and were probably pretty frustrated, and to have some amateur from the beach yell out advice ... well. Someday in your life, if it hasn't happened yet, you'll get advice like this, and I hope you're as polite as the disciples were. They take his advice and sure enough, they catch so many fish that they can't even pull in the net.

The mysterious disciple whom Jesus loved says to Peter, “It is the Lord,” and good old Peter gives his usual calm, reserved

response. He throws on his outer robe – fishing is rough, dirty work so the fishermen wore the equivalent of their underwear to keep their clothes clean – Peter throws on his outer robe and jumps into the water! The other disciples haul the net to shore and bring it up onto the beach.

One time I asked a professor, are there any places in the Bible where the meaning of a symbol is simply lost? Where we just don't know what a symbol represents? He said yes, and pointed to this passage – the 153 fish almost certainly stand for something, but no one can guess what that might be anymore.

Back to the story. Jesus tells them, “Come and have breakfast.” Jesus feeds them bread and fish, just as he fed the five thousand. Then he asks Simon Peter, “Simon, do you love me more than these?” We don't know exactly what Jesus means here --- more than bread and fish? More than the other disciples? In any case, Peter replies, “Yes, you know that I love you.” Jesus tells him, “Feed my lambs.” Jesus asks two more times, “Do you love me,” and Peter, each time says yes. And each time, in one way or another, Jesus tells him, all right then, feed my sheep.

One question and one answer for each of Peter's denials in the courtyard of the high priest. Three times, Peter had denied his Lord before the cock crowed. Now, three times Jesus allows Peter to repent, to return to himself and to the task that Jesus has called him to.

The message seems clear – if you love me, feed my sheep. Care for those whom I have called, because you can and because that is what I want from you. Feed them, make sure that they don't go hungry. Tend them, so that they don't lose their way. Teach them, protect them, defend them, love them just as I have loved you. Make sure they have clothes, shelter and the necessities of life.

There are so many lovely themes in this reading. The theme of forgiveness – Jesus offers Peter the chance to repent, the chance to undo the damage he has done by taking on the jobs of the shepherd whom he had denied. The theme of abundance, of all the bounty that the Lord provided to the 5,000 and that he now provides to the disciples. As John 10:10 says, “I come that they may have life and have it abundantly.” The theme of transformation. After the death of Jesus, Peter didn’t know what to do. I imagine in the absence of more detailed instructions, he expected to go back to what he knew best – fishing. But, Peter discovers that you can’t go back – that Jesus is a better fisherman than you are, anyway, and that Jesus has different plans for you. Follow me, he says, summoning Peter the same way he has always summoned his disciples – follow me. (Pause.)

This past week was disturbing for me. Early in the week I learned that a young man I knew from my home congregation, on whose behalf I’d just sent off a letter of recommendation for seminary, that this young man had taken his own life this past Easter. And then, just a couple of days later, along with everyone else, I learned of the shootings at Virginia Tech. And what was common to both of the tragedies was a young man who had a disease that robbed him of his hope and his judgment and ultimately his life. The victims – and if you don’t think a suicide leaves victims, well, you’re wrong – the victims’ families and friends are left to struggle with what they could have done. When Jesus says, “Tend my sheep,” he means, too, that when we see friends or acquaintances going wrong or losing their judgement or making bad choices that we let them know it and that we care about them, because Jesus died not just for us, but for them. And if we have to, we get help, because that’s part of tending the flock.

So, we return to the question we began with. How does today’s Gospel lesson help to complete the Gospel of John? I think of this passage as the coda of John’s Gospel. Musical

experts in the congregation will know the “coda” as a piece that continues and completes a movement. In this story, Jesus completes the Good News by telling Peter, telling the disciples, and telling us what he wants, what he wants our lives to be like after Easter. He wants Peter to feed his sheep and he wants us to feed his sheep and he gives us what we need to do it, in abundance. We can't go back to who we were before Easter. Whatever we were doing, Christ has a new job for us. It isn't a glamorous job, sometimes it is ugly and scary and sad, and we see and hear and say things that we'd rather not. But it is the heart of a life that is fit for eternity and that Jesus died to show us and to offer us and to which we are called, just like Peter.

Amen.