

Riverside United Church

April 7, 2024

Scripture Lesson: 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 lake. 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 and 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.

Jesus and Peter

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.'

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

"Wandering Heart: #8 - Here's My Heart"

And Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

Peter may have said to him, "Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it, seal it for your very own."

We are ending an eight week series that has taken us through the stories of Peter as he responded to Jesus' invitation to "follow me" as he left his fishing business to become a disciple. The path of learning and being a disciple has been a wandering path with moments of great clarity, lots of questions for clarification and an evening of denial and shame. The resource that we have used is entitled "A Wandering Heart" and the themes for each story have come from the lyrics to the hymn - Come, O Fount of Every Blessing.

Some may be joining this series at number 8 and some may have heard the whole series. Today's reading is one of the resurrection stories and while most of the series has been in Lent, it is appropriate that it concludes on this second Sunday in the season of Easter. It is important that we see resurrection in Peter's faith and life especially when it may be the echo of the rooster crowing that lingers in his mind and in ours.

The gospels include stories of a variety of resurrection appearances of Jesus. There is great mystery in these stories; we may have more questions than answers about the details and truth of these stories. It may be helpful to remember that they are testimonies of faith, rather than newspaper accounts. These stories lived in the oral tradition for 30, 40, 50 years before they were written, and yet somehow details like 153 fish survived. The gift of these resurrection stories is that they offer images and metaphors of hope, of trust, of empowerment, of life and so offer us some resources as we live with grief, with despair, with questions, with lament.

The hope and meaning of the resurrection is the foundation of the truth that Christianity offers into the world. Out of death, comes life. Out of despair, there is hope. In the darkness, there is light. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a current writer and speaker and pastor in the United States, writes: "The Christian faith, while wildly misrepresented in so much of American culture, is really about death and resurrection. It's about how God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small."

Peter has dug himself a grave of shame, of regret, of fear as he lives with the designation of being the rock upon which the church will be built and the reality that when the pressure was greatest that he denied knowing Jesus, he denied being a disciple. We heard that Peter ran to the tomb on Easter morning and then we hear that he went home. And so in the reading we heard today we hear that he was back out fishing and the echoes from the story when he was called to be disciple a few years before are certainly there - an abundance of fish, Jesus saying "Follow me."

One of the things that we sometimes underestimate in hearing these resurrection stories year after year is that the disciples and followers of Jesus were living with grief. They were living in a context where it would have been hard to know what to do next. We can imagine how stages of grief may have been at work in their souls and in their conversations: anger, denial, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Even with the joy of Easter moments, they were probably still not sure what to do next. Maybe because of the joy of the Easter experiences, they really didn't know what to do next.

So, in the story we hear that Peter was in the boat and in one of the intriguing details of the story, we hear that he was naked, but put on clothes to jump into the water to go toward the risen Christ.

On the shore, they have breakfast over a fire and as they break bread they remember the teachings of Jesus, "this do in remembrance of me." And then Peter and Jesus have an important dialogue, with Jesus' questions being "Do you love me?" It may sound over dramatic with the exchange happening three times. Even Peter seems exasperated the third time - Jesus I told you yes, I love you.

And yet, the drama of the story seems to be erasing each of three denials with a commitment of love and instructions about feed my sheep. At one point in the ministry of Jesus, Peter asked about how many times he had to forgive, and this story shows that Jesus' grace moves beyond past to give new life to Peter's sense of vocation and purpose.

Maybe the detail about Peter being naked in the boat is about the reality that Peter was vulnerable, his wounds exposed and in this story he is able to shed the clothing of grief, shame, regret ... He is able to put on the clothes of hope, of commitment, of meaning.

I am reminded of the words in the letter to the church in Colossae: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."

We are reminded that the Easter truth is that we are able to be pulled out of the graves we dig for ourselves, that we find ourselves in because of circumstances, realities and systems, in our world and be given new life by the grace and power of the Holy at work in our lives. Easter is not only a story of the past, but a truth that is at work in our lives and in our world, as we are invited to clothe ourselves with hope - jumping into the sea is optional!

It has been good to spend this focused time on Peter - faithful and messy, humble and afraid, loving and cautious Peter - because it is a reminder that we don't need to have all the answers, we can make mistakes, our hearts and minds and faith can wander on quite a twisted path and still be a disciple. We can live with grief, we can feel naked before God, and still be a recipient of grace and empowered with purpose.

Peter was called to fish for people and now that metaphor shifts as he is invited to feed the lambs and tend the sheep. It is an invitation to be clothed with compassion and humility and yet to live a bold discipleship as an agent of new life and hope.

The Easter message is not outdated or old fashioned because there are a lot of graves that we have dug in our lives and have been dug in our world that create a lot of despair, injustice, sorrow. Where does new life need to emerge?

Whether our thoughts in response to that question are personal, or communal or global, or all of the above, we are invited to imagine that the Risen Christ is asking us, "Do you love me?" Do you want to follow the way of love and hope?

And so may we be able to sing "Here's my heart". "Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it, seal it for your very own." And how often do we need to sing, to live that promise? One, three ... as many times as needed to nourish a faith and trust that we are not alone. As many times as needed to find new life out of death, hope out of despair.

For we are invited to find the courage to live bold discipleship in a world that craves compassion, justice, peace, and hope.

So, as we live our lives, may we recognize the glimpses, the signs, the symbols, the memories, the questions that remind who we are as God's people, as followers of Jesus.

And may there be a sense of joy as an Easter people!

Affirmation of Faith:

We believe in a God who shows up in our lives - surprising and catching us off-guard in the best of ways.

We believe in a God who cares for God's people - a shepherd who longs for her sheep to be fed and tended.

We believe in a God who took on flesh - a God whose love changed the world as we know it.

We believe that this here-and-now God invites us out of the boat, calling ordinary people like Peter, like us, into a life of service and community. And so we give our hearts. We give our whole hearts and nothing less. Amen.