

May 1, 2022 Easter 3C

John 21:1-18

The Choice of Working in Resurrection

I was watching the Call Assignment service from our St. Louis Seminary this week. That is where after three hard years of study and a one year internship, the new pastors and deaconesses get their first call—their first assignment in their first church. Twenty-six years ago, I was the one standing there waiting for my name to be called to find out where I would be a pastor. I mainly remember how nervous I was and how nervous Brenda was. When they called my name, "William Hugo, Zion Lutheran Church, Princeton, MN, Minnesota North District," all that nervousness became energy—energy to get started, to work in the kingdom, to make disciples, to make a difference. It was a very energizing moment.

Certainly over the years that energy has waxed and waned, but God continues to give energizing moments to keep me going. Today's gospel story of breakfast on the beach with Jesus is an energizing moment. We enter further into the Easter season, and the work of Easter: working out what it means to have Resurrection set loose in the world, in the church, and in our lives.

One of the oddest experiences of Easter is that it can feel empty, after the graphic realities of Holy Week: bread broken, feet washed, thorns pressed into Jesus' scalp, crosses raised, a body laid in a newly hewn grave. Easter, by contrast, is about an absence: the body is no longer in the tomb; and we are left to work out what that means.

Today's story makes it clear that some of the functions of Resurrection life are restoration of relationship, deep forgiveness and getting to work.

We encounter the disciples on their home turf of Galilee, 90 miles from the upper room with locked doors where we saw them last week. What were they doing in Galilee? Maybe after the crisis and shock of the last few days, they just needed something familiar. They needed to be at home. Or maybe they had started to listen. Remember that final scene at the empty tomb? *"And he [the angel] said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is*

*going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”* (Mark 16:6-7) Maybe they’ve gone to Galilee to look for the resurrected Jesus, because that was what Jesus told them to do.

So they’re in Galilee and Peter announces he’s going fishing, and several of the disciples decide to go along. In prior chapters in the gospel, Peter has denied Jesus and fled from the scene of his crucifixion. Though it’s clear that Peter loves Jesus without reservation, his fear has led him to distance himself from Jesus, and we are left to imagine his disappointment with himself, and his guilt and shame.

It seems that Peter has returned to what he knows; amid the confusion and grief in the aftermath of the crucifixion, he feels most like himself aboard a fishing boat, handling the heavy nets throughout the cold night. His efforts are fruitless, though; after a night of fishing, the group has caught exactly no fish. On top of his grief, and his sense of having failed Jesus, he is now confronted with failing at something he has done all his life.

But as the dawn breaks, the disciples see a man on the shore, and they see the smoke from a small fire. The stranger calls out to them and suggests something very odd: cast your nets on the other side of the boat, he shouts across the water. Surprisingly, the disciples comply – and suddenly the net is full to bursting with fish!

Suddenly Peter realizes that he has seen something like this before: on a hillside, with thousands of people, he watched Jesus break bread and fish until they were all fed. He remembers a wedding in Cana, when water was turned into wine of the highest quality. The beloved disciple shouts: “It is the Lord!” and Peter clambers toward the shore with his heart bursting with excitement.

In fact, it is Jesus, and he invites them to come have breakfast, as though this was just a normal morning after a night of fishing. The disciples shoot looks of amazement at each other across the fire and wonder if this is real.

This story provides a bookend to the Last Supper; this “First Breakfast” changes the trajectory for the disciples from grief and confusion to purpose and mission. Everything Jesus said to the disciples before his crucifixion – and in John’s gospel, he said a lot – is now coming to bear on the disciples, and their purpose.

If we had kept reading where our Gospel lesson left off and read the next four verses, we find that Jesus has some very specific business with Peter. It always bears repeating that Peter, in so many gospel stories, is a stand-in for us. His enthusiasm, awkwardness, lack of understanding, and enormous love for Jesus are just like our own. So when the gospel story focuses on Peter, it's fair to say that we are also a part of the story.

Before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus told Peter that he would deny him, and sadly, his prediction comes true. Peter is accosted repeatedly by bystanders as he waits outside while Jesus is being interviewed, and each time, he denies knowing Jesus. He is absent at the crucifixion. He is among the disciples who meet behind locked doors out of fear. Now Jesus speaks to him directly: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Jesus asks him three times, and three times Peter affirms his love for Jesus. Each time, Jesus says: then feed my sheep.

Peter is given the opportunity to undo his denial of Jesus with three affirmations of his love. Jesus tells him what to do with that love: feed the flock. Though the word "forgiveness" never appears in this story, it is nevertheless a critical theme. Peter, the impetuous, big-mouthed disciple, gave in to fear, and failed to acknowledge Jesus, failed to stick around for the bitter end. Now Peter is given the opportunity to face his risen Lord and begin again forgiven and energized.

And this story offers some of the deepest implications of Resurrection for us: we are forgiven. We are invited to start over. We are completely loved. And we have a job to do. This isn't only Peter's story; it's our story, too. When fear holds us back, love calls us forward. When we feel trapped by the way things have always been, Jesus invites us to cast our nets on the other side of the boat – change our perspective, in light of the Resurrection.

So what does this mean for you? Are you held back from the abundant life Jesus promises by guilt, shame and fear? If you understood yourself to be completely forgiven, completely loved, and completely free, how would that change the choices you make about your work? Your money? Your relationships?

The light of resurrection, shining into us, invites us to look clearly at how we have made choices out of fear rather than love, and to move away from the fears that bind us.

The implications of this story also resonate in our faith communities: Are we making choices about budget and mission based on our fear of failure? Our guilt for past failures? Or are we pointed forward, with the light of the Resurrection at our backs? If we are completely loved, completely forgiven and completely free, what does that imply about how we are to feed the flock?

We are called not only to proclaim God's love, known to us in Jesus, but to act on it. That means setting aside fear, and the way fear binds us into small lives; and embracing love as the basis of every action we undertake.

God's love, set loose in the world in the Resurrection, needs our hands and feet and hearts to make it concrete in our place and time. Like Peter, we're invited to change our perspective, and cast our nets where the love of God is available for us and there's plenty for everyone.

Jesus invites us: Come and have breakfast.

In the morning light of Resurrection, there is no room for guilt and fear. We are forgiven and energized and we have some sheep to feed.