

“Once More with Feeling!”

John 21:1-19;— Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 11, 2025

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our practice of faith
might be invigorated by the presence of resurrection joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

One of my favorite things about the Easter stories is how human they are. Writings trying to explain the resurrection could have gotten highly abstract, but even John, who is famous for long-winded theologizing, instead, offers us these poignant sketches of the disciples' lives in the hours and days after the tomb was found empty. It's a powerful reminder that God's love is not something that's just a theory or a feeling; it's something that is supposed to impact our everyday living.

There is a lot of story in the passage we read today. Let's start at the beginning. At this point in John's gospel, Mary has seen Jesus risen in the garden, and he has visited the disciples gathered together in a group two times, once on Easter night and once a week later. It's not clear what they think he's doing when he's not around. In fact, a lot is not clear. I'm guessing it would be fair to say that Peter and the other disciples were deeply confused. What had happened? Who is Jesus now? Was he coming back? What were their lives supposed to look like going forward?

And what does Peter do, when mired in this state of confusion? Something familiar, to the point of being therapeutic: “I'm going fishing,” he says. Did he ask if

anybody wanted to come with? Did anyone ask him if he wanted company? Nope. It's easy to imagine that Peter was actually trying to get some space, some time alone so his heart could get settled. But apparently everyone thought going fishing sounded like a good idea, because the other six immediately chimed in with, "We'll come too!" We can only guess what Peter was muttering to himself as they headed out.

Now everybody knows that you can't fish effectively if you're making a lot of noise, so maybe Peter still got the quiet time he was craving, at least to some extent. Then again, they didn't catch anything, so maybe there was way too much talking going on. But the other thing I think I know about fishing is that going fishing is not really always about actually trying to catch fish. So what was going on here? Were these men, who had been through an incredible amount of trauma over the previous weeks, simply seeking solace in a familiar, contemplative practice? Were they testing out what it would feel like to just return to their former lives, doing what they'd been doing before they met Jesus? Or had they actually realized there was nothing in the house for breakfast?

I have another question about this fishing trip. All night long they had been fishing and catching nothing. Jesus appeared on the shore and suggests they throw the net over the other side of the boat. Why hadn't they tried that already? Now, here's where my almost total lack of knowledge about actual fishing boats becomes a little bit of a problem. Or maybe it's an advantage because I won't know the

difference between a good question and a stupid one. Was there a structural reason they hadn't put the net over there, something about the boat itself that made it harder to drop it on that other side? Was it a wind thing? Or a current thing? Was it because they were all right-handed? Or did they just never do it that way?

There is a lesson here for how we do church. Church is often like fishing in this story. Our lives are confusing and overwhelming, and so we go do the thing that is familiar, the thing that quiets our hearts and brings us comfort. But it's also often true that we just keep doing church the same way we always have, without even considering why we're doing it that way. We may keep doing it that same way long after the effectiveness of that approach has worn off. It just never occurs to us that we could throw the net over the other side of the boat. Maybe that seems harder. Maybe it seems like the oars or the wind or a sandbar will be in our way.

I think it's also possible that sometimes our goals for church become like the goals of someone who goes fishing for comfort rather than to actually catch fish. We do church to get away from the world's problems, to let our minds zone out for a bit and follow a routine that helps us feel better. But if this story is any guide, we need to consider the possibility that Jesus wants us to actually catch some fish. And that we might need to do something differently for that to happen. Or even that Jesus knows we really do need more, even if we're not aware of that fact, and so Jesus asks us to do something differently, so that we can then be surprised by the abundance of God.

It can be quite a moment to really honestly ask ourselves if we are ready for the abundance of God. We don't like change, after all. If the abundance of God were to show up, what would we even do with those 153 fish? That's certainly more than we would need for breakfast. But what might it be like to just trust Jesus for a moment, and see what happens when we take his suggestion and shift how we're doing things? Even if it means working against the wind, or having to deal with various obstacles in the way? There is an invitation here for those willing to dare accepting it.

The second part of our story could be seen as offering us the opposite lesson. This is the gospel, of course, so it's going to come at us from every which way. What if it's not that we need to change up how we're doing things, but that we need to keep doing them over and over, until the point finally dawns on us and we have a breakthrough? "Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me?" Omigoodness, how embarrassing! "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. I love you. You know everything; you know that I love you!" "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." Over and over. Three times he asked.

And yet, when we think of the number three, in relation to Peter, is this the episode that comes to mind? I am afraid that it isn't. Peter is sadly still more famous for his three denials than for his three confessions of adoration. Yet here is the story that wipes clean those denials. Here is the story that shows Peter what comes next, how his future is not about returning to life as a fisherman, but becoming a shepherd.

And not just him. You know the rest of the disciples were listening in. Those feed-my-sheep's weren't just for him. It seems significant to me that this is the second and only the second time in the whole gospel of John when Nathanael is mentioned. The last time Jesus was talking to Nathanael, what did he promise? "You will see greater things than these." This whole story is a transitional chapter, an overture to what is coming. They thought they were experiencing an ending, but it was actually a beginning. They were graduating, which sometimes feels like an ending, but is, in fact, merely a threshold into the life you've been preparing for.

Sometimes we have to keep plugging, repeatedly doing the things and saying the words that form us, until they finally sink in. We keep receiving the Bread that Jesus offers us, until we suddenly realize we have enough to share. We keep being renewed by God's mercy until one day we find it within our own souls to forgive that person we haven't been able to yet. We come every Sunday, singing as well as we can, showing up to be the beloved community together, and then one day, the person or family who really, really needs beloved community walks in the door.

The stories of Easter are not powerful because they're stories about abstract, perfect people receiving abstract joyful news in ways that match our expectations. The stories of Easter are powerful because they are a little awkward and unbecoming, because they happen to real people like us, because they are still happening. Maybe Jesus has some ideas about how we can shift what we're doing and see new results, the

abundance of God, enough to feed ourselves and many new friends. Maybe Jesus is going to just keep asking us about love over and over until we finally get it. Will we hear that promise that we will see “greater things than these”? Will we get over the awkwardness of being pretty sure we’re seeing Jesus but afraid to say so? Will we let others join us on our fishing boat, even if we thought what we needed was some time alone? These stories are brimming over with invitation and promise, if we have ears to hear and hearts to offer in response. When Jesus calls, let us answer faithfully. Hallelujah and Amen.