

Sunday, May 1, 2022
Third Sunday of Easter (Year C)

John 21.1-19

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/308964961389139>

(Sermon begins at about 19:45)

“Meeting Us Where We Are”

I love all the accounts of the post-resurrection appearances that we hear in these days after Easter. They are all very different, each conveying something about the Risen Lord, but also something about the people Christ appears to. And in the process, these stories somehow weave together attributes of the Risen Lord and attributes of those to whom he appeared, to say something about who we are as the Body of Christ. As those called to carry on his mission and ministry in the world in our own time.

It's hard to pick which of the post-resurrection stories is my favorite, as they are all so wonderful and endearing in their own unique ways. But today's account of Jesus appearing to the disciples on the beach definitely ranks right up there. First off, I like the fact that the story is a bit whimsical. Portraying both Jesus and the disciples in a bit of a lighter manner than in many of the other post-resurrection appearances. As a result, this account is so relatable in many ways. The disciples are certainly relatable in their reactions. And even Jesus is relatable. Which I find interesting, as throughout the Gospel according to John, Jesus seems a bit unapproachable. Not that he is, but John definitely seeks to portray Jesus from a perspective referred to as “high Christology”—that Jesus' divinity is more evident and on display than in the other Gospels. Given John's high Christology, what I find so appealing about this story is that after Jesus' death and resurrection, when he is definitely inhabiting more the divine realm than the human realm, that Jesus comes off as more human. More approachable. More relatable. Even, more playful. And maybe that's the key to today's Gospel story.

This particular account involves Simon Peter and six other disciples, who are back home at the Sea of Tiberias—also known as the Sea of Galilee. This is where at least Peter, James, and John were originally from. After their last encounter with the Risen Lord—the infamous Doubting Thomas incident—the disciples left Jerusalem and returned to Galilee and to the lives they had when Jesus came on the scene three years before. Which for at least some of them was fishing. Why they have returned to Galilee is uncertain. And perhaps a bit concerning. As you may recall from last week's Gospel, when Jesus appeared to the ten disciples on the evening of Easter, one of the things he did was commission them as apostles: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 20.21-22). He specifically commissioned them to go out in his name to continue the work he had begun. The work they had been doing together over the last three years. And he even gave them the Holy Spirit as a companion and guide, as a source of strength and inspiration, in this work. So, having been commissioned, why are they in Galilee, presumably resuming their former lives? Maybe they lost their nerve, their resolve to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus. Maybe they were confused about where to begin this

new work they were called into and were seeking a safe place to retreat to and to regroup, to figure out their next steps. Or, maybe they were ashamed at how badly they had messed things up back there in Jerusalem—when they all deserted Jesus after he was arrested, and when Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. Maybe this prompted them to retreat to familiar territory to try to forget about how they had failed their friend and teacher.

This is the background with which today's post-resurrection appearance begins—the last one recorded in the Gospel according to John and the last one we hear this Easter season. Back in Galilee, Peter decides he wants to go fishing. Perhaps as a way of clearing his head and getting a little perspective, in the comfort of an old and familiar routine. And maybe catch a few fish to earn a little money in the process. The others decide to go along with him. After all, what else do they have to do? Now fishing on the Sea of Galilee was often done at night, which is obviously what has happened here. As the new day dawns, they decide to call it quits and return to the shore, having caught nothing. Before they can get out of their boat and bring it ashore, they are greeted by an apparent stranger who is standing on the beach: "Children, you have no fish, have you?" (Jn 21.5a). They don't recognize Jesus at this point, despite the fact that the Risen Jesus has made at least several appearances to the disciples: the one on Easter night and then a week later when he appeared specifically to see Thomas. So, Jesus suddenly appearing to the disciples should be old hat by now. Although apparently not.

"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" (Jn 5b-6). It is only now that they recognize who this stranger is. John exclaims, "It is the Lord!" (Jn 21.7). It is likely that the abundance of fish they caught at the direction of this apparent stranger reminded them of other examples of abundance at the hands of Jesus. Reminiscent of the vast amount of water turned into wine at the wedding at Cana. Reminiscent of the feeding of the 5,000 with just a few loaves of bread and a few fish—which, coincidentally, from that spot on the beach, you can see the hill where, according to tradition, the feeding of the 5,000 took place.

John's exclamation of "It is the Lord!" prompts one of the more humorous scenes of the story. Peter, who is naked—fishermen at that time often fished without clothes—puts on clothes and then, in his excitement, jumps into the water to get to Jesus on the shore. It's not like Jesus hadn't likely seen him naked before. We know that they all went fishing together in the past. Be that as it may. Once they are all on the beach, Jesus and the disciples fix breakfast. A little strange. The Risen Lord appears and instead of issuing some profound statement or giving some significant teaching, immediately starts cooking.

What this particular encounter demonstrates, in a way none of the other post-resurrection appearances do, is that Jesus meets the disciples where they are. He meets them in whatever they were feeling in the aftermath of his death: grief, fear, uncertainty, embarrassment, confusion. He meets them in their work. He meets them in the mundane, day-to-day activities of life, such as fixing and eating breakfast. Even if they don't immediately or always recognize it, he meets them where they are.

When they get to a place of recognizing that he is with them no matter where they are physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually, Jesus is then able to bring them along and help them realize that he still needs them. No matter what has transpired in the past—despite the abandonment, despite the denials, and all the guilt and embarrassment that go along with it—Jesus continues to love them. And Jesus continues to want them on the team. To continue the work he began with them:

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.” . . . After this he said to him, “Follow me.” (Jn 21.15-17, 19b)

To this point, Peter has resisted Jesus’ commissioning, to the point of running away from it, returning to his old life. But here, Jesus gives him an opportunity to see that whatever happened in the past is past. In this exchange, Jesus is giving Peter another chance. On Good Friday, Peter denied Jesus three times. Here, in the light of the resurrection, Jesus asks Peter three times to profess his love. In Jesus asking three times, “do you love me?” Peter is painfully aware of the elephant in the room. But Jesus is not doing this to rub in the fact that Peter denied him three times, that Peter deserted him. It is to emphasize that Jesus’ love for Peter transcends what happened in the past. And that Peter’s love for Jesus remains intact, stronger than ever. Three expressions of love, counterbalancing three expressions of denial. Each time Jesus asks, “do you love me?” he is letting Peter know that he still loves him and needs him. And hopefully Peter’s love for Jesus can help him move beyond what happened in the past. The unspoken message is that Peter needs to set aside any guilt or shame he is feeling and focus on continuing Jesus’ work. That Jesus continues to trust and value Peter. That Jesus chooses Peter to be the one to carry on Jesus’ most important work, being shepherd to his flock.

Jesus’ message in this post-resurrection appearance to the disciples also carries a message for us. That he does not always come to us in spectacular, earth-shattering ways or experiences. If anything, Jesus meets us where we are, right here and right now. He comes to us and meets us in whatever we are feeling in our own lives: in the joyful, happy times, but also in our grief, fear, uncertainty, embarrassment, or confusion. Particularly in our times of grief, fear, uncertainty, embarrassment, or confusion. He meets us in the circumstances of our lives: in our work, in our personal life, in our play and recreation. He meets us in the mundane, day-to-day activities of life. Even if we don’t immediately or always recognize it, he meets us right where they are.

Not only that. Jesus also lets us know that no matter where we are in our lives right now, no matter what may have happened in the past, what we might have thought, said, or done, he still loves us. That he still wants us to be part of the team. To continue the work that he began. To do the work that only we can do, as he invites each and every one of us, “Follow me.”