

Breakfast With Jesus

John 21:1-19

Today we have breakfast with Jesus. His invitation, by the seashore. Grilled fish, maybe hashbrowns, eggs, toast. Jesus the short-order cook. Can you smell the charcoal fire in the chilly morning air?

It's a resurrection appearance unique to John's gospel. And it might include us here today.

In John's Easter gospel, Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene, then that night to the disciples huddled in fear behind locked doors. Jesus appears, needing no door. "Peace" he said to them, then "Peace", a second time, for they needed to hear it more than once. Then he called them anew: "As the Father sent me, so send I you." He breathed on them the Holy Spirit, because they would need it, then gave them their first job: go set people free by forgiving sins. You are now my forgiveness community, central to my forgiveness movement.

Then the next Sunday he appeared to Thomas because Thomas needed to see the wounds in his hands and feet in order to believe in the resurrection. Jesus obliged his need.

Now sometime later, days or weeks we do not know, Jesus appeared to his disciples by the seashore in Galilee where he called them first. John says that he wanted to “show” himself to them.

I

Here’s how it happened. The disciples had gone fishing, seven of them. Simon Peter, Thomas, now believing, the sons of Zebedee, James and John, Nathaniel and two others unnamed. We will know in just a minute that one of the unnamed was John, the “beloved disciple.”

Peter had said to all of them, “Let’s go fishing”, and they joined him. Why had they gone back to fishing? Does it reveal some indecisiveness on their part? When you don’t quite know what to do, you do what you know how to do. Were they waiting for more instructions? Did they just need to be together again? Did *Jesus* want to be with them one more time?

So, Jesus showed up on shore as they were fishing. As in other resurrection appearances, he showed up incognito, like a curious vacationer walking by checking on the fishing. It was daybreak. “Boys”, he yelled out to them, “caught anything?” “No”, they yelled back. (John reports that the boat was 100 yards off shore.) Jesus yelled back, “Then cast your nets on the other side of the boat and

you'll find some!" Did one of the disciples do a double-take? It's déjà vu all over again, to quote Yogi Bera. They'd heard that before!

They cast their nets on the other side, and their nets were full to the breaking, so heavy with fish they couldn't get them in the boat but would have to haul their nets outside the boat to shore. Déjà vu for sure!

Then came the recognition. The beloved disciple was first. "Look, it is the Lord!" he said to Peter. And Peter, always impulsive and headlong, Peter put on his outer garment—he was fishing in his skivvies—jumped overboard and thrashed his way to shore. Couldn't wait for the boat! The others followed him to shore in the boat.

II

And there was Jesus cooking breakfast over the charcoal fire, fish and bread. He said to them, "Bring me some of those fish."

Peter went to the boat and dragged over the swollen net of fish. John comments: "They were large fish!" And then he counts: 153 of them. Novelist David Duncan, in a novel about fishing for salmon in the Northwest, *The River Why*, commented on this scene. This, he says, is how we know *for sure* they were fishermen! They were "big ones", they said, and they counted every one!

What about the number 153? Was there some hidden meaning in it?

Commentators through the centuries have put in their two cents. Some say the number 153 was symbolic and have manipulated the number to suggest a variety of meanings. You almost had to have a degree in math to follow them. Others said the number was an allegory, referring to the church or the Trinity!

I took my course in John's gospel at Union Seminary with the world's foremost scholar in John's gospel, Raymond Brown. When he got to this passage about the 153 fish, he surveyed all the meanings given to the number through the years. Then he said with perhaps a bit of mischief on his face, that he was haunted by the possibility of a dream he might have. In the dream he died and when to heaven, and meeting Jesus asked, "What about the 153 fish? Why 153?" Jesus said, "Because that's how many there were!"

Jesus then invited the disciples to breakfast. Bread and fish, like many times before. Breakfast at the Resurrection Café. And he invites us now too.

III

After they had finished eating, Jesus turned to Peter, and it's as if they are the only ones on the shore. You've been in conversation like that, in a crowd, then starting a conversation with someone so enthralling that it is as if you are the only two in the room. It must have been like that to talk with Jesus.

And now come the three questions, the three answers and the three responses from Jesus.

“Simon, son of John”, Jesus used the name he used when he first called Peter by the seashore. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs.

Then a second time:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Tend my sheep.”

Then a third time, “Simon, Son of John, do you love me?” Then Peter, cut to the quick of his heart, said, “Yes Lord! You know everything, you know that I love you!”

“Feed my sheep.”

Jesus was rehabilitating Peter, freeing him from remorse. Remember Peter denying Jesus three times on the night of his arrest, hours after vowing at the Last Supper, “Lord, I would never deny you!”

We've all broken promises and vows, let down people we love the most. And we can be crushed by regret and remorse, undone by our failures. Jesus rehabilitates us and calls us anew. Our service to God, our opportunities for good are not over.

Then Jesus said to Peter, as he had on the first time they met on the seashore: "Follow me."

IV

How has your following of Jesus changed through the years? Does your discipleship look different today than it did years ago? Mine does. Some of it has to do with my turning my ministry more beyond the walls of the church to the world around me.

Someone has said that there are *two* conversions, two turnings as we follow Jesus. The first turning is away from the world toward Jesus, to love him, love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. The second is a turning back to the world, to love it as God loves it. That's true for me. And it keeps happening, this two-fold turning. Turning to Christ, then to the world, over and over again.

"Feed my sheep", Jesus said. How has your understanding of *sheep* changed through the years? Who are they? Are Jesus' sheep inside the church or outside the church? Or both? How has your understanding of *feeding* changed?

What are all the ways we can feed God's sheep? Inside the church and outside in the community? Spiritually, physically, educationally, politically? There's in-church feeding and out-church feeding. How has your understanding of your own following of Jesus changed? Earlier in my life Monday-night Visitation in neighborhoods to invite people to church was big. Whatever the changes in your understanding of sheep and feeding, it's all about love.

Albert Schweitzer was an acclaimed biblical scholar, Bach scholar and organist. Early in the 20th century he wrote a watershed book on the historical Jesus named, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. He surveyed 100 years of scholarship on the historical Jesus. His book has spurred on another 100 years of scholarship. In his work he noted how often scholars see what they want to see in Jesus, viewing Jesus according to their own ideas and ideals. His conclusion was startling:

But the truth is, it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually risen with [people like us] who is significant for our time and can help it.¹

Those words were prescient for his own life. Reading Jesus' parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus", he felt Jesus calling him to leave his comfortable life as a European professor, go to medical school and become a medical missionary to Africa. So he did.

The Paris Society of Missions at first balked at appointing him as a missionary because of his reputation as a rather radical theologian. But they sent him on to Africa with the proviso that he not teach or preach his theology, and stick to medicine! So he went, and established a hospital in Lambarene.

Schweitzer said later: “For years I had been giving myself out in words.” But now, he wrote, he would be putting Jesus’ “religion of love” into practice.² Those are poignant words for a preacher to read. How about for you?

I think Jesus still comes to call us, and calls us in new ways all our lives. The final paragraph of Schweitzer’s *Quest of the Historical Jesus* has been a companion to me ever since as a young person I sang the words in an anthem, long before I read his book. It’s about the ways that Jesus came to his disciples and comes to us:

He comes to us as one unknown,
without a name, as of old, by the lake-side,

He came to those who knew Him not.

He speaks to us the same word:

“Follow thou me!”

and sets us to the tasks

which He has to fulfill for our time.

He commands.

And to those who obey Him,
 whether they be wise or simple,
 he will reveal Himself
 in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings
 [I would add “joys”]
 which they shall pass through in His fellowship,
 and, as an ineffable mystery,
 they shall learn in their own experience
 Who He is. ³

We know him best in the following of him.

We spy him as we get out of the boat. He motions us over. “How about breakfast?” he says. We eat the broiled fish and baked bread. And he says to us all over again, “Follow me.” What might it mean, this time? I mean today!

1. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press:1998), 401.

2. Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography* (N.Y.: Holt, 1933), 114-115.

3. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, op. cit., p. 403.