

## **"It Is the Lord"**

### **John 21:1-14**

<sup>21:1</sup> Later, by the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples. This is what happened. <sup>2</sup> Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two other disciples of Jesus were together. <sup>3</sup> Simon Peter said to the others, "I'm going fishing."

They told him, "We're going with you."

They went out in a boat but didn't catch a thing that night. <sup>4</sup> As the sun was rising, Jesus stood on the shore. The disciples didn't realize it was Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> Jesus asked them, "Friends, haven't you caught any fish?"

They answered him, "No, we haven't."

<sup>6</sup> He told them, "Throw the net out on the right side of the boat, and you'll catch some." So they threw the net out and were unable to pull it in because so many fish were in it.

<sup>7</sup> The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put back on the clothes that he had taken off and jumped into the sea. <sup>8</sup> The other disciples came with the boat and dragged the net full of fish. There weren't far from the shore, only about 100 yards.

<sup>9</sup> When they went ashore, they saw a fire with a fish lying on the coals, and they saw a loaf of bread.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus told them, "Bring some of the fish you've just caught." <sup>11</sup> Simon Peter got into the boat and pulled the net ashore. Though the net was filled with 153 large fish, it was not torn.

<sup>12</sup> Jesus told them, "Come, have breakfast." None of the disciples dared to ask him who he was. They knew he was the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Jesus took the bread, gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

<sup>14</sup> This was the third time that Jesus showed himself to the disciples after he had come back to life.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, one afternoon several years ago when I was working the cash register at the front of the winery gift shop, a man and a woman stood before me to purchase some wine. The man was rather tall, about my age, and wore a Cleveland Indians shirt and ball cap. I asked him where he lived in Cleveland, and he replied that he lived in Lorain, a town west of Cleveland. I told him that I was also an Indians fan and had lived in a suburb just west of Cleveland. We chatted a little longer as he ran his credit card. In those days, cashiers could read the signature on the register screen. I looked at the man's signature, did a double-take, and then looked at him more closely. I asked him, "Do you remember me at all?" He said, "You look familiar, but I can't place you." I said, "Ron, you were an usher at my wedding. You were my big brother in our fraternity." Small world! I did not recognize him standing in front of me, but I recognized him by what he did – sign his name.

Seven disciples sat in a fishing boat together on the Sea of Galilee. They had nothing to do. They had not yet received their marching orders from the Lord. They needed to keep busy while they pondered all that had happened. And, they had to provide for themselves. Alas, they

had a miserable night of fishing. They were ready to call it quits and row ashore when a man, about a football field distance away, called to them and told them to lower their net on the other side of the boat. They did not recognize the man at first. Perhaps they were too tired. Maybe they had left their bifocals ashore. Maybe they were not expecting to see anyone so early in the morning. But immediately, their net was filled to overflowing. Something seemed familiar, and suddenly John understood it, he recognized Jesus not by sight but by Jesus' action. "Lower your nets." When had John heard that before? Luke, chapter 5, Jesus tells Peter, "'Put out into deep water, and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.' When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break." After a night of fruitless toil, John recognizes that something has just changed and cries out: "It is the Lord."

## I. The Lord is with us.

Following Jesus' initial appearances to his disciples in Jerusalem, he instructed them to wait for him in Galilee. Like all of us, the disciples probably could not just sit around twiddling their thumbs. They were too "antsy," had too much on their minds. You know how it is. When events reshape your life, when lots of things are running through your mind, when you are anticipating a change or challenge, it is hard to sit still and hard to sleep. Sometimes, too, "idle hands are the devil's workshop." So, Peter decided to take control of what he could. He returned to what he knew best, with what he felt most comfortable — fishing.

Although Peter could decide to go fishing, and the other disciples could decide to go with him, they could not decide for the fish. A decade ago one February, when I went ice-fishing with my son and brothers, I spent the first-day drilling holes and baiting hooks. Everyone else caught something but I didn't, no matter what I did. Peter, John, and the others put out their net but the fish would not cooperate. Doesn't that reflect our experience with the world sometimes? We make our plans. We double-check our preparations. We attempt to cover every contingency, but the world does not cooperate. During the 1980s and early 90s, people expressed their frustrations with a set of comical rules based on real observations. These were called "Murphy's Laws," for example, "If anything can go wrong, it will, and at the most inconvenient time so as to cause the greatest inconvenience to the greatest number of people." Then there is Etorre's observation on Murphy's Law, "Murphy was an optimist."

Looking at our text, maybe we should look at the disciples in a different way. These were real people. They had the same worries, concerns, and needs that we all do. They had mortgages and taxes to pay; they had overhead to consider. They needed to work to eat. There was no social welfare agency that offered support for out-of-work disciples of a crucified religious leader. They also could not run to the local mental health clinic and receive support for their confusion and mixed emotions. Anyway, the disciples spent a night fishing but they did not catch anything. Maybe that was not their intention. Perhaps all they wanted to do was to pass a little time, engage in some "guy talk," swap some sea stories and drink a few beers. However, they still needed to provide for their families, at least Peter did. Unfortunately, the night resulted in nothing tangible, no fish to take to market. Instead, there was wear and tear on the nets, boats, and the disciples'

nerves as well.

So often life is like that. We do not seem to get ahead. We must run faster just to remain in place. Reverses like illness or unemployment cause us to go backward. Several years ago, I read with great interest the stories of a number of bank mergers. Nations Bank took over Barnett Bank. People were "right-sized" because of the merger. Just about the time employees thought the bloodletting was over, Nations Bank announced another mega-merger. Employees again wondered about their futures. A chaplain friend of mine from Okinawa was selectively early retired from active duty two months before he was considered for promotion. When we toil in vain, when we fail to realize our plans, when circumstances seem to beat us down, we become anxious and ask, "Where is God?"

The Lord is with us. He knows about the disciples in the boat, and he appears to them, although they do not recognize him initially. A man from the shore calls to the disciples in the boat and tells them to let down their net on the other side of the boat. I can imagine the ensuing conversation among the disciples after a long night of futile fishing.

"Who does this guy think he is? We have been out all night!" complains one.

"That's ridiculous," grumbles another. "Left side of the boat, right side of the boat, what difference does it make?"

"The fish just aren't biting," replies the third. "It's too windy. The moon is in the wrong quarter, whatever."

Nonetheless, the disciples let down their nets one more time, and lo and behold, they catch so many fish that their net threatens to break. Suddenly, John puts two and two together. He recognizes the signature. He declares, "It is the Lord."

So, what is my point? We do not see Jesus now. Our sight is blurry, our recognition clouded, and our expectations minimal. We need to meditate and observe Jesus' hand all around us. We need to listen to his voice as he calls to us from Holy Scripture, serves us in worship, and feeds us at his table.

Our loving Lord watches us. He sees our struggles. He knows our setbacks and pains. He comes to us. The Bible reminds us of this many times. David, a man familiar with trials, wrote, "For in time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion . . . he shall set me on a high rock." (Psalm 27:5) The Lord speaks through the prophet Jeremiah, "Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (23:24) John quotes Jesus' promise, "I am the good Shepherd; and I know my sheep . . ." (John 10:14)

If God knows, we can take comfort, for He also has the power to help. Jesus told his disciples before his ascension, "All power in heaven and on earth, has been given to me." (Matthew 28:20)

## II. The Lord is with us with his power.

The Lord is with us with his power. That morning long ago, Jesus performed a double miracle. First, he gave the disciples 153 large fish. I suppose someone might make a big deal about the number of fish. One hundred fifty-three seems like a strange number, but maybe the point is just that Jesus provides abundantly. I have heard also that the number represents the number of species of fish in the Sea of Galilee at the time. The disciples caught one of each fish, representing all the fish. Jesus had commissioned the disciples as fishers of men, and they would soon go into all the world, and to all people.

Second, the Lord prepared a table for his disciples. That may not seem like much of a miracle when compared to the resurrection or even to the feeding of the five thousand. However, it shows the Savior's abiding care and his ability to answer our needs. It further reminds us of what David said about the "good shepherd. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows" (Psalm 23:5). Jesus revealed his power, his ability to care and to help. He cleansed lepers. He restored sight to the blind. He enabled the lame to walk. He raised the dead from their graves.

Christ's power is available to us too. He supplies us with our daily bread. We ask God for it in the Lord's prayer. David assures us in another of his psalms, "The eyes of all look expectantly to you, and you give them their food in due season" (Psalm 145:15). He helps us in every need. At times he removes our trials. I think every one of us can recall times when we seemed overwhelmed. We went to God in prayer and the issues became manageable. But there are other times when God does not simply make the problems go away. Instead, He may give us a more precious blessing. He gives us the strength to bear our trials. A sign outside a church carried the message, "Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors." The apostle Paul knew intimately the manner of God's presence and power. Many times, Paul lived through difficult challenges with his Lord's help. Paul wrote, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you will be able to bear it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) Paul wrote later to the Philippians, ". . . for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content . . . I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (4:11, 13)

What power we have available! Hence, we pray, taking all our petitions and requests to God, with thanksgiving. As we pray, we trust. Jesus told us, "And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing you will receive." (Matthew 21:22)

## III. The Lord is with us with his grace.

The Lord is with us with his grace. He appeared to his disciples in his time, but he also came when the disciples needed him. He provided for the immediate needs of the disciples – emotional, physical, and most especially spiritual needs. He refreshed their hungry bodies and nourished their weary spirits. He gave them temporal bread, but more importantly, he gave them

the "bread of life."

Jesus also came to the disciples in answer to a wider, more profound need. He came to strengthen them for their future work as fishers of men. These were the people whom he had chosen and trained to carry on his work – Peter, the foolishly bold; James and John, the impetuous brothers; Nathanael, the guileless; and Thomas, the despondent doubter. Whatever their shortcomings, Jesus graciously called these men to serve him. Their fruitless night of fishing may have been intended to teach them all a greater lesson. Fishing for men can be more frustrating and frequently much less successful than catching regular fish. We cast the net, we share the Word, and yet, nobody comes. Count the empty chairs around you this morning, two weeks following our celebration of the resurrection. It would be wonderful if we could assert that the people represented by the empty seats were worshipping elsewhere, but we are certain that is not the case. Jesus reminded the disciples to keep on fishing. He will give the harvest. He will bring in the fish.

Jesus is with us with his grace, too. He showed his love for the world by his sin-atonement death. Can you remember back to your high school or college literature class? Can you remember the professor asking you to read a particular book and then asking you to discern the author's theme or intent? I can remember asking myself, "Why can't I just read the book for fun? Who says the author must have a purpose other than to write a good story?" Well, the Bible is a book. It is a collection of sixty-six books, and it has a very definite theme. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. He very explicitly states the theme, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

The love that Jesus displayed for his disciples attends us, too. We have his promise. Even more than a woman cannot forget her nursing child, our Savior will not forget us. (Isaiah 49:15) The psalmist declares, "Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." (Psalm 73:23-24) The Apostle Paul speaks boldly about his Savior's promise. He knew that Jesus had walked with him every step of his ministry. Paul concluded in his letter to his spiritual son, Timothy, "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing." (4:8)

"It is the Lord." He remains with us. Therefore, we can live in humble dependence, grateful for his blessings, and trusting in his continued providence. We do not need to worry about our Savior. He never forgets us. He fastens his loving arms around us. He leads us to our eternal home. "It is the Lord." See Him! Trust Him! Receive strength! Take comfort! Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*