

April 7th, 2024

John 21:1-19 “Here’s My Heart”

He is risen! (He is risen indeed). The flowers may be gone, but we’re not done with Easter. As I said last week and as I’ve said many times before, we are a people of the resurrection. That means we celebrate and affirm the resurrection all year round. So one more time if you will - “He is risen!” If you were here for sunrise service last week, you’ll recognize the passage Dave read. This scripture is the reason why we started having sunrise service around a campfire 10 years ago. According to Matthew and Mark’s gospels, the only time Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection was to commission them to “go into all the world” and continue his ministry. Luke has the resurrected Christ appearing to some of his disciples on the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus. Then he appears once again to his disciples in Jerusalem and has lunch with them. We’ll cover that next week. But John, in my opinion, has the best post-resurrection appearance story. Why? Because it takes place outside and it involves a campfire and food. Just like church camp.

We’ve been exploring Peter’s role in Jesus’ ministry since early in February. We’re not finished with Peter though because his story doesn’t end with the conclusion of the gospels. Peter and the other apostles get the spotlight for 28 chapters in the Book of Acts as they help build this ever-growing movement that will eventually become “the church.” We’ll officially celebrate the birth of this movement on May 19th when we get together with our sisters and brothers from First Christian Church in Paradise for our annual “Pentecost Picnic in the Park.” But today we’re going to end our “official” study on Peter here in John’s gospel because it’s the only gospel that concludes with a one-on-one conversation between Jesus and Peter. Over the course of our study, we saw Peter drop his nets to follow Jesus and we saw him walk on water ... sort of. We hear his confession of faith in Christ, and we get to see his reaction when Jesus calls him “Satan.” Jesus washes Peter’s feet and tells him and the other disciples to love one another, but Peter also denies

knowing Jesus three times during the trial and crucifixion. But then we saw him run to the empty tomb when he heard the news of the resurrection. Our text this morning closes the circle of Peter's story.

I love how this morning's story starts out. Seven of Jesus' apostles are gathered on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius also called the Sea of Galilee or Lake Gennesaret. The gospel writer doesn't really say anything about why they were there or what they were doing. But then suddenly, out of the blue, Peter gets up and says, "I'm going fishing." This sounds like something Peter would do, doesn't it? I can picture him sitting there all restless and twitchy. Because for the last three years of their lives, the disciples followed Jesus through this whirlwind of teaching, healing, and preparing themselves for living under God's reign. Then it all ended very abruptly with Jesus' crucifixion. But three days later they learned that death could not keep Jesus down. After the resurrection Jesus appeared to the disciples a few times. In the case of John's gospel, he just kind of shows up when they aren't expecting him and really doesn't give them any sort of commission. He just says, "Peace be with you," and tells them to hang in there. But now the disciples are back in Galilee where a good number of them came from in the first place. They're in familiar territory. As usual, Peter isn't sure what to say or do so he just jumps up and says, "I'm going fishing."

I get that. When I'm stressed out and not sure I know where I'm going or what I'm doing, I gravitate to what's familiar. There's comfort in doing what's familiar. For me it's, "I'm going camping." When everything else in my life seems unpredictable, I want to do something that I know how to do well and where I can predict the outcome. I want to throw my camping gear in the back of my truck, put my kayak on the racks and go float in a lake somewhere. Yeah, but camping can be unpredictable, right? Yeah, I was reading the news a couple of weeks ago and there was a story about two brothers over near Georgetown that were killed by a mountain lion. Clearly the mountain lion caught them by surprise. Camping seems like it's full of potential hazards and bears a high level of unpredictability. Yes, I am aware of that. I know that

rattlesnakes, bears, and mountain lions are out there. I acknowledge the risks. But camping feels safe to me because it's familiar. It's where I go and what I do to get away when I'm overwhelmed. Fishing is what's familiar to Peter. In fact, it's how he made his living until he met Jesus. "I'm going fishing." The other six disciples said, "We'll go with you." So they set out at night to fish, but they didn't catch anything. Their nets were empty. Does this sound familiar? It should. We started the first Sunday of Lent with a story about the disciples on a boat and how Jesus led them to an abundant catch of fish.

Except this time, Jesus isn't in the boat with the disciples. He appears to them from the shore. They don't know who he is at first. Then Jesus says, "Doesn't look like you've caught anything! Try dropping your nets over on the starboard side and see what happens." They did, and there were so many fish in the net that they couldn't even haul it in. That's when Peter thinks, "Wait ... this seems familiar." John recognizes Jesus right away and says, "It's the Lord!" Now this is where the story takes an interesting turn. The gospel writer says, "When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea." I'm not going to ask for a show of hands for anyone who's ever gone fishing naked. That's your business, not mine. If that's your thing, then more power to you. I get teased for using cheese for bait. Who am I to judge? When it comes to fishing, you do what works for you. What seems really strange to me is how Peter felt he had to put clothes on in order to jump into the water. But this is Peter we're talking about here. We never know what he's going to do. When everyone finally makes it to shore, Jesus is there waiting for them with bread and fish by a campfire. Jesus, the bread of life, comes to his disciples to call them once again to the work of the harvest. But what will this look like? How will they be able to offer such a witness to the world after the events of his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection? How will we be able to offer such a witness? How will our testimony sound different on this side of the empty tomb? It is in this context that we need to hear the conversation between Jesus and Peter.

According to John's gospel, the last direct interaction between Jesus and Peter prior to this picnic was when Peter drew his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane and cut off the ear of the high priest's slave. Jesus told Peter to put his sword away and let things happen the way they're supposed to happen. After Jesus was taken away, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times just as Jesus predicted he would. There was some unfinished business between Peter and Jesus. This day on the beach is the first time they have spoken directly with one another since the incident with the sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than these others?" Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my lambs." Then he asks him again, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Once again Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." This time Jesus says, "Tend my sheep." Then for a third time, Jesus asks Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" John writes, "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 says, "Feed my sheep."

Three times Peter denied Jesus, and three times Jesus asked if Peter loved him. I don't think Jesus asked these questions to shame Peter. I believe Jesus knew that what he asked of Peter was something Peter just couldn't get his head wrapped about before. But now, in this renewal of his relationship with the resurrected Christ, Peter's trust is affirmed and Jesus' trust in Peter is confirmed. Jesus needs Peter to be the good shepherd now—to provide pasture, to protect the sheep from wolves, thieves, and bandits so that the sheep may have abundant life. That's a tall order. But how can God so love the world without Peter ... without us? I know I talk a lot about the importance of actions over words. And I stand by this. But we're not just called to "do loving things." We are called to be the very presence of God's love in this world. That's the church's legacy. That's our mission. Love leads the way in everything we do and say. We give our hearts and our whole selves to Jesus so that we can deliver the good news that he is risen.