

Where Do You See Him?©

John 21:1-19
DeHaven Gates

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Dr. Sharlyn

Third Sunday of Easter

How are you feeling about Easter? Now that we are three Sundays past the resurrection excitement, are you moving on? Has the busyness and the chaos of life and work already caused you to let go of some of the joy of hearing that Christ is risen?

I don't know this for sure, but maybe that's how Peter and those other disciples who were with him were feeling. Maybe it was about three weeks after that glorious day when the risen Jesus appeared to his followers in that room where they were hiding.

They had seen him and they believed but ... now what? What does it mean to them for the rest of their lives? Maybe they had waited, hoping to see Jesus again. He had appeared at the empty tomb and then again that evening in the room where they were all gathered ... all but Thomas. And then he came again, a week later, to show himself to Thomas who had refused to believe until he saw Jesus for himself.

But, perhaps by now they were getting fidgety. They needed something to do. Maybe they needed to clear their minds so they could understand if there was something more Jesus wanted.

Whatever reason ... Peter decided to do what he knew best. Or, what he had known best of all before Jesus had come along and invited Peter to follow him.

Peter said, "I'm going fishing." The others – Thomas and Nathaniel, James and John (the sons of Zebedee) and two others, who were unnamed disciples – all agreed to go with Peter.

They got into the boat and went out into the Sea of Tiberias to do some fishing. The Sea of Tiberias is the same as the Sea of Galilee. It is very near to the site where Jesus fed the 5,000 with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. (John 6:1-14)

Peter and his friends fished all night but they did not catch anything. At daybreak they were coming in tired, sleepy (I would think) and empty handed.

So maybe it was the fact that it wasn't completely daylight yet, or maybe it was just that they weren't expecting anyone, or maybe they were just drowsy and a little numb from staying up all night, but they didn't recognize the person standing on the beach.

Of course it was Jesus, who called to them saying "You didn't catch anything, did you?" To which they answered, "Nope. Not a one."

And then Jesus – doing what he had done from the beginning (I'm thinking about a wedding and water changed into wine – something they had witnessed) Jesus said to cast the nets on the other side of the boat.

And suddenly, John tells us the nets were so full of fish – really large fish – that they were having a hard time pulling it all in. And now, one of the disciples who is not named, the one John simply calls the “disciple Jesus loved” recognized Jesus and told Peter, “it is the Lord!” and Peter, who was fishing in the nude (actually, he probably had on something. The New International Version says he put on his outer garment. So he must have had on an undergarment.)

Whatever the reason or situation, Peter put on some clothes and then he jumped over the side of the boat, which seems kind of funny to me. Normally, I think, we would take off some of our outer clothes to jump into the water. But, he was excited because Jesus was suddenly there waiting for them. He could not wait for the boat to get all the way to the shore. So Peter jumped in and swam to shore, leaving the others to haul in the net full of fish.

Let’s talk about Peter for a minute. What do we know about him? Remember, back in the first chapter of John, when Jesus first met him? Andrew, Peter’s brother, went and got him and took him to meet Jesus.

But his name was Simon. And he and Andrew were fishermen, along with their father, whose name was John.

That day, Jesus looked at Simon and said: “You’re John’s son, Simon? From now on your name is Cephas” (which is Aramaic for “Peter”, which, in Greek means “Rock”).

We know that Peter was from the city of Bethsaida, as was his brother Andrew. According to Matthew, Peter was married because we have the story of Jesus’ healing Peter’s mother-in-law. Peter was there with James and John on the mountain and witnessed Jesus’ being transfigured.

Peter was the one who stepped out on the stormy waters in faith, walking towards Jesus – until he took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink.

It was Peter who was the first to proclaim that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, but it was Peter who also was rebuked by Jesus for trying to say that Jesus was wrong about his coming death.

It was Peter who vowed he would lay down his life for Jesus, only to fulfill what Jesus told him he would actually do – deny knowing Jesus three times after Jesus was arrested.

And now, it is Peter who is so excited to see Jesus again – the risen Lord – that he cannot wait for the others. Imagine his face. Eager is the word I think of. Eager, full of love, overwhelmed. But maybe a little unsure. Maybe self-conscious, remembering his denial?

But, Jesus doesn’t seem to be holding any grudges, does he? What a great gift of grace he is giving them – breakfast on the beach. Charcoal grilled salmon and tuna and bread toasted just right. Jesus does with them what Jesus loved to do – share a meal with his friends.

There are so many times in the Gospel stories that Jesus was at the table eating with friends – sinners and tax collectors and wayward women and you name it, he loved to share a meal with people who loved to be with him. Always showing grace upon grace. Always abundant, immeasurable, unexpected, lavish grace.

Which brings us back to the fish. 153 large fish! I'm not a fisherman/woman but I am pretty sure that's a lot of fish. And John tells us that even though there were so many that it was difficult hauling in the nets, not one net had even a tear in it.

There has been speculation among scholars who are smarter by far than I am, but when it comes down to it, I couldn't find anything to indicate just exactly what the number 153 was supposed to mean.

How about we just go with it – Jesus caused them to catch 153 large fish! A really, really huge amount of fish. An abundance of fish. An abundance – like the grace and love that is so big and so much more than we expect – or deserve – that we can't help but be overcome with amazement and love and gratitude at the sheer blessing of knowing Jesus.

How about, just this once we don't even look for a metaphor or symbol but we just give thanks for this story of outpouring grace and abundant love?

Karoline Lewis, an assistant professor of preaching at Luther seminary, writes about this number of fish in her commentary at WorkingPreacher.org:

“Can't it be simply that moments of abundance reveal God's love?

The moment of recognition of Jesus in this story? When lack is transformed to abundance. When despair is moved to hope. When abandonment is replaced with the restoration of relationship.”

What a day! What an unexpected day it turned out to be. An epiphany. Did you think the season of Epiphany was over? Not yet. Not ever! If we have our eyes open, if we are keeping an expectant watch in every place and space in our lives, Jesus will show up. We will experience his abundant grace.

John tells us that after breakfast, Jesus turns his focus onto Peter, calling him by his first given name.

“Simon,” Jesus asks, “Do you love me?”

And Peter answered, “Yes Lord, you know I love you.” And Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Again, Jesus asked him a second time: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” And again, Peter answered: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

And Jesus said: “Tend my sheep.”

Finally, Jesus asked Peter a third time, the same question, which by now hurt Peter's feelings: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And Peter said: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." And Jesus said: "Feed my sheep."

Then Jesus went on to foretell that Peter would end up laying down his life for Jesus' sake. Peter would become the Rock that Jesus had first named him. "And from that Rock," Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church."

Maybe, Jesus (who knew everything) asked Peter to profess his love for Jesus three times, to give Peter a chance to forgive himself for denying knowing the Lord before Jesus' death.

This resurrection story is about commission and epiphany. It is a great story – just hearing one more time that Jesus showed up alive again. But it's so much more than that.

It was more than that for Peter and the other disciples because in their love for Jesus, they were asked to follow him. And it is more than that for us, as well. Now, loving Jesus and following Jesus means shaping our lives according to Jesus' life.

Words of love for the Lord, must be matched by a life of love, which is evidenced by how we (his disciples today) do the same as what Peter was commanded to do – that is, to feed and tend Jesus' sheep: the people who are in need, who are hungry, who are poor, who are longing to meet and know this Lord whom we love and follow. If we love him, our lives will reflect that love.

This story is also about continued epiphanies. We never know where we will see the risen Lord. I believe that we probably encounter him numerous times in a day, but we miss seeing him because we aren't expecting to see him. Where might those places be?

How about in the face of a loved one whose eyes light up when they see you? How about in the conversation you have with your spouse or a friend – a sharing of mutual love and a genuine caring for one another? Or when someone does a good deed for you – not because they owe you something or because of an obligation, but just because they care for you.

Most definitely I think we encounter his grace when we are forgiven by someone we hurt. Or when we look into the eyes of someone who is in need and we experience a deep compassion for that person. Or when one shows compassion to you.

When Peter asked about the future fate of the other disciple (whom Jesus loved) Jesus indicated that it was possible that that disciple would not lose his life as a martyr, as he had foretold would happen to Peter.

The point is, all who love Jesus are his disciples. All who love him live according to his ways and his command to love and care for others. Paul says that in the church there are a variety of gifts. We are not all the same and our lives as disciples will not all go in the same direction or end in the same way.

We should not compare ourselves to others but trust in the love and the call that our Lord Jesus Christ gives to us. We look for him; we expect him to reveal himself to us in many places and times in our lives. We keep our ears open and allow him to lead us on the path of discipleship that he wills for us.

And hopefully, every time we come to this table, we remember his abundant grace and love. We see him in the breaking of the bread and in the cup of salvation. We know him as we eat and drink the meal which he shares with us.

Where do you see him? Are your eyes open?

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