

May 12, 2019

Mother's Day

John 21: 1-19

Prayer: Dear God, as our Easter season continues, help us to be aware of its pertinence to our lives. Help us to live into its might and power. We pray in the name of the one who was resurrected. Amen.

On the Beach

Next week, we will take our beach vacation. Three couples and three of our adult children are going to Fripp Island.

Everyone is relieved that Madison's not coming. When she comes, she brings along young men from Ireland or Boston or wherever she's most recently been. And then we have to scramble to find beds.

This year's group is people we've vacationed with often – even the “children” are in their mid-30s and we've been going since they were 13 or 14.

One of the women sent the rest of us a picture this week. It was a T-shirt that read, “All I do is beach and wine.” Yeah, that's about right.

We'll swim in the ocean, talk on the beach, eat seafood, play endless games of cards, read an armful of books. It's my favorite week of the year.

In three of my first four books, the characters make a trip to the South Carolina coast. It provides a break in the action and allows them to dance on the deck of Coconut Joe's at the Isle of Palms.

In the book I'm currently working on, the characters *live* at the beach – part of the year on Sullivan's Island, part of the year on the eastern seaboard of Scotland. All they do is beach and wine – and solve murders.

And so it's probably not surprising that one of my very favorite Scripture passages is one that pictures Jesus on the beach. It is one of those incredible post-resurrection appearances recorded in John's gospel.

This Easter season, we've been reading mostly from Luke's gospel. But this is a story that appears nowhere except John's. At this point in John's story, Jesus has been crucified, buried and recognized on Easter morning by Mary Magdalene. He has then appeared to the disciples twice in a locked room.

Now he shows up on the beach at the fresh-water Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee.

We'll start with the first 14 verses. **John 21: 1-14:**

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.

²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.³ Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.'

⁶He 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.

⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake.

⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

¹²Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Those of you who've been with us a long time know that the founder of our art room, Karen Lucci, once painted this scene – Jesus sitting on a beach, barefoot, cross-legged, in a blue T-shirt, with a spatula -- cooking fish. I looked all over my office for the postcard we made from it but I couldn't find it.

The reason I loved the painting is that it spoke volumes about what church can be. I've been in church for most of my life, but for the first four decades I went because it was something I "ought" to do.

I ought to go.

I ought to expose my children.

I ought to keep quiet because if the people there knew what I truly believed, they'd ask me to leave. Or at least to stay away from their Vacation Bible School.

In none of those churches would a T-shirted, barefoot Jesus have been appropriate.

When I was 46 and had started seminary, our family moved to First Baptist Greenville. And for the first time, I found that a church could be fun.

It was a church where I didn't have to hide what I believed.

A church where it was OK to doubt and to question and to laugh and to enjoy the company of other Christians who knew good and well none of us had all the answers.

A church that gave me this butterfly stole because they wanted to send a message of vibrancy and color and new life to this side of town.

That sense of fun and community is something we've tried to cultivate at Triune. As everyone in here knows, we welcome drug addicts and sex addicts and gambling addicts and alcoholics.

We welcome folks who have lost everything, including a home.

We welcome the poor, the disabled, the recently imprisoned, the prostituted, the marginalized.

And we welcome the rich, the able-bodied, the never-before-imprisoned, the privileged, those who don't have a clue what it means to live on the margins. Because they can be in need of healing as much as anyone.

We are fully aware that a lot of hurt walks through our doors, and we deal with it. But that doesn't mean we can't live together in joy, in creativity, in abundance. As we work to empower people to heal and to recover, modeling joyful life is a tool.

For sometimes the best way to heal a hurt is to awaken joy.

I see this last scene in John's gospel as a slam-bam explosion of joy into the disciples' troubled lives. They were hurting. They had followed Jesus for three years. They had been through the awful Holy Week, in which their friend was arrested, tried and beaten. Peter had denied him three times during that period.

They had been through the horror of his execution, watching him being mocked and hung from a cross.

They had been through the puzzlement of hearing Mary Magdalene's testimony that he was alive on Easter morning.

They had met him themselves twice in a house where they were barricaded – because they were afraid.

And now, now, they've gone back to fishing. My sense of this passage is that they believed that their friend had risen. It just didn't seem pertinent to their lives.

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And so they went back to fishing. And not very successful fishing at that.

John is clear that on their own, the disciples caught no fish, even though they fished all night. Then Jesus appeared and directed their fishing.

“(A)nd now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.”

But John's not through: **“(T)he other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish.”**

And he's still not through: **“So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.”**

Three times John stresses the abundance of this catch. Three times, he contrasts the absence of fish before Jesus' appearance to the plentiful fish afterward. What is this if not an account of exuberance, of abundance, of plenty?

And what does this little group of friends do with all those fish? Jesus hosts a cookout for them on the beach.

Why shouldn't we look at this scene with the sense of fun that's inherently in it?

Why shouldn't we look at it through the eyes of Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello? I think Jesus cooked those fish *Under the Boardwalk*.

This is a fun scene. And if we don't know that Jesus wore a blue T-shirt as Karen painted, we don't know that he didn't either.

After the fun of the cookout, Jesus turns serious. He turns to his broken friend, Simon Peter, who is presumably still reeling with guilt over the events of the last night of Jesus' earthly life. When Jesus was on trial in the high priest's house, Peter was in the courtyard by the fire, denying that he knew this fellow from Galilee.

Now let's read the second half of our Scripture passage to see how Jesus handles his friend's hurt. Read **John 21: 15-19**.

15 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.'

¹⁶A 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.'

¹⁷He 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.

¹⁸ "Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.'

¹⁹ "(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

Just as John showed the liveliness of the fishing scene in three references to the extravagant catch, he now has Jesus ask Peter three times if he loves him. Peter gets exasperated with the repetition.

But it was Jesus' way of offering his friend forgiveness for the three denials, with these three chances at redemption. Three chances to restore their relationship. Three chances to accept a new job, a new mission, to tend Jesus' new church.

"Follow me," he concludes.

And we know that Peter does. For when we meet him again in the book of Acts, he is a fearless and fierce evangelist who cannot be silenced – even with the threat of jail, even with the threat of death.

It is an astonishing change for Peter and for the other disciples who hang right in there with him. And what readers for 2,000 years have attributed that change to ... is the resurrection.

Only these post-resurrection appearances -- combined with the upcoming Pentecost -- could have changed these disciples so completely, changed them from men who ran from the cross and barricaded themselves in locked rooms to the men we meet in the book of Acts. Men who shrug at the threat of imprisonment and loudly proclaim, “**We must obey God rather than any human authority.**” (Acts 5: 29)

It turned out that the resurrection *was* pertinent to their lives.

My wish for Triune is that it be like this beach on the Sea of Tiberias where seven disciples met the resurrected Christ.

That it be a place where courage and joy come together in the wake of the resurrection.

That it be a place of fellowship and fun as people across all socioeconomic strata cook and eat together and build friendships.

That it be a place where we find the notion of a T-shirted Jesus wielding a spatula funny rather than blasphemous.

That it be a place where generosity and sharing are practiced, and affordable housing gets a boost.

That it be a place where you never know where the next blessing might appear – say, a choir where one didn't exist two months ago.

Secondly, I wish for it to be a place where deeply hurting individuals, such as Peter, can meet Christ and receive forgiveness, receive empowerment, receive the wherewithal to pick up and go on. As we attempt to lift each other up, I am more and more persuaded that groceries and clothes and rent and bus tickets are not the answer. The answer is precisely what Jesus gave Peter.

The encouragement, the means, the dignity to get back on his feet and become the leader of the church.

But Peter had to take part, too. He had to be willing to give up his guilt, to forgive himself, and take responsibility for his healing.

Sometimes we at Triune have obvious needs – food, shelter, employment. But there is always something else beneath. That’s why a man walks off a job even if it means he will be homeless. That’s why a woman misses shelter curfew even if she knows she’ll be out on the street.

Past failures, past abuses, past hurts stand in the way of healthy living. Some of us think we’ve failed so miserably, behaved so badly, that we don’t deserve better lives. I imagine that’s what Peter thought, too, that morning on the beach.

Until the resurrected Jesus fed him some grilled fish, forgave him and commanded, “Follow me.” Until he accepted Jesus’ forgiveness and followed him.

We have only to read the book of Acts to know how successfully he did so. We have only to read the book of John to know that forgiveness is available to us as well.

I think the two distinct parts of this beach scene in John’s gospel give us the two ways in which to be the authentic church. Two ways to heed the call, “Follow me.”

With the joy and bounty of the fish fry, on the one hand. With care toward our hurting brothers and sisters, on the other.

That’s the picture we get in John’s last resurrection scene.

That's the picture of the best kind of beach vacation.

Amen.