

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



John 21:1-14
“Jesus: Servant Of His People”

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(3rd Sunday of Easter)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

JOHN 21:1-14 "JESUS: SERVANT OF HIS PEOPLE"

//Mt. 28 (Galilee) , Lk. 24:36-49, Resurrection + Instruction

A) v.1 RISEN JESUS REVEALED TO THE DISCIPLES. When? Unleavened Bread Over, Post-Ascension

1 After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples beside the Sea of Tiberias; (7x) Mk. 14:28, 16:7 / Return Home and he revealed himself this way: New Manner, Odd Circumstances, Focus On His Self-Revelation, 2:11, 9:3, 17:3

//Fishing Material In Synoptics, Mk. 1:17, Mt. 4:19, Lk. 5:1-11

B) vv.2-6 FISHING STORY (TEACHING ON EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM). Outward Mission

THE LORD LEADS THE CHURCH IN WITNESS/MISSION

1) vv.2-4 Scene 1: Peter Leads, 7 Disciple Tradition (All Fishermen?). Unity, 17:11, 20:22

2 1) Intro Simon Peter, 1 Many Obvious Symbols In Narrative Thomas, called the Twin, 2 Contains 28 Words Not Elsewhere In John Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, 3 1:19-21, 51; Disciples, 1:40, 11:16, 1:45ff. the sons of Zebedee (i.e. James and John), 4-5 //20:6, 25 and two of the other disciples were together. 6-7 1:35, No Mention Of Fishermen To This Point In John //1 Cor. 15:5, Lk. 24:34 First Appearance?

3 2) Dialog Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." Peter Initiates, What He Knew, Leadership Emphasized They said to him, "We will go with you." INITIATIVE 1, 17:11 Unity, They Follow

3) Effect They went out into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Human Action, Failure, Lk. 5:1-11 Dependency Lesson: "Apart from me you can do nothing." 5:19, 9:33, 15:5

2) vv.5-6 Scene 2: Jesus Provides A Harvest. A New Day! Follow Him = Fruitful Work

4 1) Intro Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; 20:19, 26; He Comes; His Presence Makes All The Difference but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. He Must Present Himself, Initiate Encounter

5 2) Dialog Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any fish?" 1:12, Endearment, Paideia = Children/Young Men They answered him, "No." "%\$#@X! No" A Free Rendering!!

6 He said to them, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find..." He Knows! Promise, Obedience, Abundance 2:1ff, 6:1ff.

3) Effect So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, for the quantity of fish. Ezek. 47:7-10, //Lk. 5:1-11 Without His Direction They Cannot Fish, Success Is Ahead

C) v.7 RECOGNITION SCENE: 2 TYPICAL RESPONSES. Both Have Significant Roles

7 The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" v.2, Given Discernment, 20:18, 25 INITIATIVE 2, First To Believe, 20:8

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on (tucked in) his clothes, Peter Initiates for he was stripped for work, and sprang into the sea. Traitor Has Devotion, Waded To Shore?

2 Key Leaders, Peter Acts First, Ask Questions Later

B') vv.8-13 MEAL STORY (INWARD FELLOWSHIP/ REUNION MEAL). //6:1-13

//Lk. 24:15, 30 Meal Setting

1) vv.8-11 Scene 1: Peter Leads. THE LORD NURTURES THE CHURCH AT TABLE

8 1) Fish/Bread But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, They Follow, 7 Common Terms vv.2-6 for they were not far from land, about a hundred yards off. They Do Their Duty

9 When they got out on land, Charcoal //18:3, 18 High Priest's Courtyard they saw the charcoal fire there, with fish¹ lying on it, and bread.² He Already Has Resources

10 2a) Command Jesus said to them, "Brings some of the fish that you have just caught." They Work; New Resources, Jn. 6:1-13 INITIATIVE 3, Earlier Multiplied For Multitudes

11 b) Response So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of fish, Enormous Strength, Initiate, 12:32 one hundred and fifty-three of them; Detail, Universal Outreach, Mt. 28:19, Picture Of Strength, 21:6 and although they were so many, the net was not torn. //19:23-24, None Lost Of What He Gives, //12:32, 6:44 Gk. Zoology = 153 Fish Species At That Time = Catholicity, Mt. 28:19

2) vv.12-13 Scene 2: Jesus Provides A Fellowship Meal. Lordship Includes Fellowship Meal

12 2'a) Command Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Meal Of Reunion, Jesus Nourishes His People

13 b) Response Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" Great Awe, Amazing And Mysterious Presence They knew it was the Lord. //Lk. 24:13-35 Known At Table

1) Bread/Fish Jesus came and took bread² and gave it to them, and so with the fish.¹ Jesus Feeds His Friends //6:1-13 He Serves Them (13:5, 13); They Serve The World

A') v.14 RISEN JESUS REVEALED TO HIS DISCIPLES. Disciples As A Group: 1) 20:19-23, 2) 20:26-29

14 This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. 4th? Mary?

A Brief Treatment Of John 21:1-14

The fourth of the Johannine appearances is not in Jerusalem but in Galilee, presumably Capernaum with Peter's boat (Mk. 1:16-20, Lk. 5:1-11). The seven days of Unleavened Bread is ended and the pilgrims return home. The surface structure is a 5:1 concentric pattern (A. v.1, B. vv.2-6, C. v.7, B' vv.8-13, A' v.14). Terms of inclusion in the A//A' frames are: *after this // after, Jesus revealed himself // Jesus was revealed, again // the third time, disciples // disciples*. The B//B' frames each have two parts: 1) Scene 1 in which Peter takes initiative (vv.2-4 // vv.8-11), 2) Scene 2 in which Jesus provides a large catch of fish (vv.5-6), then a fellowship meal (vv.12-13). Seven terms and phrases link B//B': *Simon Peter* (v.2 // v.11a), *other disciples* (v.2e // v.8a), *the boat* (v.3c // v.8a), *did not know it was Jesus* (v.4b) // *They knew it was the Lord* (v.13b), *net* (v.6a // vv.11a, c), *haul* (v.6b) // *hauled* (v.11a), *the quantity of fish* (v.6b) // *full of fish, one hundred and fifty-three of them* (v.11). At the center is a contrast between the discernment of the beloved disciple (v.7a) and the devotion of Peter (v.7b). The word *disciple(s)* is used seven times (vv.1, 2, 4b, 7a, 8a, 13, 14), as is the name *Jesus* (vv.1, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 14). In each of the central subsections (B-C-B') Peter takes initiative: v.3 to go fishing, v.7b to leap into the sea and swim to shore, v.11 to haul in the net. Jesus also issues three commands (vv.6, 10, 12). Parallels to Lk. 5:1-11 indicate common memory. Twenty-eight words not found elsewhere in John points behind John to source material.

The appearances are unexpected, "After this Jesus *revealed himself* again to the disciples beside the Sea of Tiberias, and he *revealed himself* this way." The miraculous catch has two halves: 1) vv.2-4 Peter's initiative, 2) vv.5-6 Jesus' provision, each in three divisions: Introduction, Dialog, and Effect with a contrast between *no catch* (v.3b) and *great catch* (v.6b). A list of seven disciples headed by *Simon Peter* opens the story. Whether the number is symbolic (a new whole of seven) is disputed. Peter's idea is to return to fishing. The response is unanimous, "We will go with you." But merely human initiative is unfruitful, "They went out into the boat, but that night caught nothing." An earlier warning comes to mind, "...for apart from me you can do nothing" (15:5). The introduction of the risen-yet-unrecognized Jesus in v.4 gives new possibilities, and the dialog begins with an odd address, "Children (young men), do you have any fish?" The mockery is mild, and a choral "No" resounds. A command and promise follow, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find..." They do, and the response is overwhelming. Jesus knows where the fish are! He is leader of the mission, not Peter. So who is the mystery man? The answer is given at the pivot of the story in the recognition scene of v.7. The beloved disciple sees, and announces to Peter alone, "It is the Lord." What follows is the second example of initiative as Peter tucks in his garment, leaps out the boat and swims to shore (v.7b). The physicality of Peter is evident in his swimming and hauling the heavy net from the shore. He's a man of action.

The meal story (B. vv.8-13) also has two parts: 1) vv.8-11 where Peter leads, 2) vv.12-13 where Jesus provides. A second structure is the reversal of *fish/bread* in v.9b to *bread/fish* in v.13b. In between this inclusion are two examples of command and obedience (vv.10-11 // vv.12-13a). The six disciples drag the seine to shore and find a charcoal fire cooking fish and bread. To the command, "Bring some of the fish you have caught," Peter alone responds. The number 153 may be a clue from ancient zoology as the then known number of fish species. To be caught by Jesus is for the whole world; the church is *catholic*. That Jesus feeds exhausted and now exhilarated followers is a sign of ongoing care. The risen one leads the mission and sustains his witnesses. To call this *the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples* omits the initial appearance to Mary Magdalene (20:1-18). The initiative belongs to the risen Jesus. We follow.

JESUS, SERVANT OF HIS PEOPLE

“Come and have breakfast.”

The compassion of the risen Lord for his tired, hungry friends.

J O H N 2 1 : 1 2

I hold in my hand a book, *The Resurrection of Jesus* by Dr. Michael Licona. I heard him lecture last year; he’s a bright guy. After 600 pages of arguments for and against the historicity of Christ's resurrection, he says that "a good scholar must account for the facts with integrity." He uses an example from American history:

“Long before John Adams became the second U.S. President, in 1770 he was a respected lawyer in New England, where the Boston massacre had just occurred. No lawyers would defend the British soldiers involved for fear of the American public, which had now grown even stronger in anti-British sentiments. But Adams believed everyone was entitled to a fair trial. He took the case and lost more than half his clients. In a courtroom described as *crowded and electrical*, Adams argued the soldiers were innocent.... He then added, ‘Facts are stubborn things and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictums of our passions, they cannot alter the state of the facts and evidence.’”

Dr. Licona then comments, taking the side of his opponents, "No matter how much one may loathe the idea that Jesus rose from the dead and fantasize about other outcomes, the historical bedrock remains the same Jesus' resurrection is the best explanation of the relevant historical [evidence]."¹ It’s where the facts lead, to history’s most amazing event, the bodily resurrection of Jesus after his certified death, then followed by appearances to demonstrate his new form of life and relaunch the movement. And if he’s alive, bearing the prototype of fuller form of human embodiment with new powers, then he’s available to know and follow today.

¹ (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2010), 609-610.

People from the past are not directly available in the here and now, only from their writings- or what others said about them- but not Jesus. The purpose of reading his four biographies is to create curiosity not just to know *about him* but to know and be known *by him* in a dramatic relationship of give-and-take as more and more of who you are comes under his active dominion. He came to be known and trusted and followed; he came to demonstrate what he called *the kingdom of God*- meaning how life changes at ground level when God moves in to run things.² He came to rule us by love in order to extend his influence through us into every corner of a world that needs to know who God is and what God's up to. That's my read. What's yours?

Everyone needs to hear a credible witness about the God who's come to their rescue: how the Father sent the Son in the power of the Spirit to invite people back into the fellowship of the divine life and all it cost him to do that.³ Thirty years of hidden faithfulness in nowhere Nazareth was followed by three years on public display: ninety percent preparation for ten percent demonstration. Most of Jesus' life was spent living in daily faithfulness with village folk, building up insight into the human condition, attending funerals of people he knew well, working with his hands as a builder, being a firstborn older brother, watching all the young men marry except himself, putting up with the shortages of living in an occupied land, looking up with longing at the night sky and wondering when release was to come. This was his humble training ground; village faithfulness was his university till the day he left and headed down to the Jordan. And the divine mission he received was entrusted to Jesus' followers only after three years of apprenticeship to him- of being thoroughly imprinted by their Rabbi- and then through them to us in a long chain of transmission, but not as something we do on our own but under the supervision of the risen Jesus with his biographies as our reality check and the Holy Spirit as our supervisor.

So, I ask, What if he's as full of delightful surprises now as he was then?⁴ Verse 4, "Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach." Every new day is a

² For an introduction, see N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1999), Chapter 2, "The Challenge of the Kingdom," 34-53.

³ For a fresh read of the gospel, N.T. Wright, *Simply Good News* (San Francisco, CA: Harper One, 2105).

⁴ "When God ceases to surprise us, that may be the moment we have ceased to do business with him" (N.T. Wright, *John for Everyone* [Louisville, KY: WJK, 2004], 161).

day to look for him. What if he showed us where and how to fish for all kinds of prepared people because we took time to listen and obey? Verse 5, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find...” What if we are his nets? Verse 13, “Jesus came and took bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.” What if our daily meals with each other and the extraordinary meal of communion were places of deep connection? What if Jesus reclaimed our hearts and energies because he’s the best there is and touches the deepest parts of who we are? What if he’s able to speak to us as we read his stories and listen for his voice together?

“Well, Peter,” a skeptical friend might ask, “When did he last show up?”

Answer: “Last Sunday night in a closed room with locked doors, and you can’t believe what he invited Thomas to do: to poke his fingers in the wounds. And then, as suddenly as he came, he was gone, like he stepped back into another world.”

“Well, when’s he coming back? Did he say?”

Answer: “No, and we don’t know. It’s always a surprise. I think he likes it that way because it keeps us dependent and alert. We know he’s always near, just beyond sight, but when he shows himself is not ours to determine. It’s how it is.”

As you’ve heard me say before: who God raises from the dead is who God certifies, and God did not raise Moses, Buddha, Mohammed or Socrates. Some of their souls may be in heaven, but none has a resurrection body like Jesus as a preview of the kingdom of God. God did not raise George Washington, Elvis, John Lennon or Dale Earnheart, though each has his devotees. God raised Jesus and him only, which is God’s way of setting aside this single life as uniquely authoritative. Only Jesus is *fully approved*. The baptismal announcement, “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased” was confirmed in his resurrection.⁵ All roads do not lead to the top of the same mountain; any road that does not eventually lead to Jesus Christ is a false path, a dead end. There’s much we don’t know, but classic Christians say with confidence that *God is like Jesus* because in the resurrection God said *This is who I am; this is who I back; I am like Jesus*.⁶ In Christ we see what love does when it shows up in history, and resurrection is the divine seal of approval on that entire project. So we make a simple offer to people:

“Do you want to know the One who made you? Then immerse yourself

⁵ Mark 1:11.

⁶ Matthew 11:27.

in his people and listen to the stories we read from the Book. Gather with us on Sundays. Saturate yourself in the words and works of Jesus. Learn our ways, and God will make himself known to you. We've seen it many times. We are the womb of a new birth and a new life.”

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is an astounding truth claim, not a fairy tale or legend, and on it the whole of this faith stands or falls.⁷ We hang suspended by a slender, strong thread; and if Jesus is not bodily resurrected by God's approval, then the whole thing's a joke, just one more human invention parading around as a religion, not different in that sense than any other world faith, so take your pick, or even better, make up your own according to the popular *smorgasbord method*: a bit of Buddhist meditation, a dash of Hindu yoga, a dose of environmentalism and pantheism, several of the ten commandments that don't challenge your vices, a single verse from the Sermon on the Mount on not judging, a little incense, a dose of the afternoon talk shows, and lots of rock-n-roll. After all, faith is not about what's true but what fits my lifestyle and makes me happy as an individual. Then tell everyone you've evolved to the place where you are now *spiritual but not religious*.⁸ *Smorgasbord* may be the fastest growing religion in America, but it's incoherent since it blends incompatibles and revolves around the self and its whimsies; it's *the worship of me in a world of choices*, a new form of idolatry.

The church has a history glorious and despicable. We've gone to the ends of the earth doing good, and that's glorious. And we've participated in- and sometimes even lead- the persecution of the Jews, and that's despicable.⁹ We've built hospitals and universities; we raise the status of women and children everywhere we go; we've also compromised with the worst of which humans are capable, as in the ugly story of slavery and Methodism in the South and apartheid in South Africa. Church history

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:12-19.

⁸ See “Responding to ‘Spiritual but Not Religious’ Christians,” www.catholic.com/blog/jon-sorensen/responding-to-%E2%80%9Cspiritual-but-not-religious-%E2%80%9D-christian; “Examining the Growth of the ‘Spiritual but Not Religious’”; www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/us/examining-the-growth-of-the-spiritual-but-not-religious.html?_r=0.

⁹ See Susan Michael, “Anti-Semitism Rears Its Ugly Head In Many Forms,” www.charismanews.com/opinion/standing-with-israel/49152-anti-semitism-rears-its-ugly-head-in-many-forms.

is a mixed bag, but I contend history would be much darker and even more brutal without the church.¹⁰ We who follow Jesus remain a restraining influence on evil and an immense force for good. We are salt that holds back cultural rot and light that challenges moral darkness. Take the churches out of Greenwood, then watch as life gets ugly and dangerous in a hurry. It's not till the immune system fails that you become aware how many bugs and cancers it held at bay without your awareness.

What the immune system is to the body, the church is to the culture in which it lives, and when it becomes less and less faithful to its convictions, it's less and less effective as a preservative. It's not by becoming a chaplain to the culture's whims that we do our work but by remaining a clear alternative as defined by Jesus, and in our day this is particularly true of sexual ethics, which is *the hot topic* in our culture.¹¹ Our Christian vision of faithfulness to God's design and of fidelity between men and women is increasingly challenged: one man and one woman in a permanent, public, blessed union and a shared life of Christian faith called marriage. With the Bible we make humane adjustments for hard hearts and promise-breakers in divorce and possible remarriage, but fidelity is the ideal we hold up before ourselves and the world. This is our teaching which we enact in the wedding service which assumes- at a minimum- that both parties are baptized and thus church members somewhere.¹² We don't do generic weddings; we do Christian weddings full of biblical teaching after serious counseling. Read the service sometime.

All other arrangements- including cohabitation, polygamy, and serial monogamy- are opposed to Scripture and the best wisdom of the church. And whatever the law now- or in the future- permits, other arrangements are not good for people, no matter how popular or trendy the claims of freedom without boundaries are. A philosophy of *whoever and however and whenever* may represent for some a new frontier of human freedom and rights beyond the limits of gender and traditional

¹⁰ For a brief volume, see Martin Marty, *The Christian World: A Global History* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2008).

¹¹ See the blog by Trevin Wax, "Must Christianity Change Its Sexual Ethics? History May Hold The Key" at www.religionnews.com/2015/04/08/must-christianity-change-sexual-ethics-history-may-hold-key-commentary. He draws a telling analogy between the modernists of a hundred years ago who wanted to do away with miracles and the so-called moral progressives of our day who want to rewrite our sexual ethics.

¹² "A Service of Christian Marriage," *U.M. Hymnal*: 865.

wisdom, but it's not our teaching, never has been. We know better; that was the paganism of the ancient world over against which the church took a clear stand, offered a better alternative, and at whose hands it suffered.¹³ Are we willing to be a visible minority again? Are we willing to say, "Live as you will and experience the consequences, but we will not change, and will not apologize because we know better based on divine revelation in Jesus as sealed in his resurrection from the dead. And when you grow sick of your life, we still have the medicine that heals and restores."

Whatever the culture decides about family law- and I expect to see only more bizarre arrangements to be sanctioned as we ignore Scripture and the traditions of natural law and as we press the logic of individual rights and preferences to its natural conclusion-¹⁴ a church that goes along with such will at some point cease to be recognizably Christian, especially when church constitutions- the very DNA of religious institutions- are officially changed. How much can you give away before you're no longer the thing you were? When do you *de facto* become another religion with different sources of revelation and authority? Can you answer that for me because we are teetering near some kind of edge? If we cannot defend classical Christianity and its counter-cultural moral vision and practices, we are simply no match for the rigors and determination of classical Islam and its program. What if an aggressive Islam is a lash of divine wrath across the back of an indulgent church grown corpulent and sleepy in the arms of the world? God used Babylon against ancient Israel. What do you do with a church that's grown bored with Jesus Christ?

The seeds we planted in the 1960's are now bearing mature fruit because the cultural radicals are now in government bureaus, endowed university chairs and running the media, their hands on the control levers of common culture.¹⁵ What I

¹³ See Michael Kruger for a summary, "One of the Main Ways that the Earliest Christians Distinguished Themselves from the Surrounding Culture," michaeljkruger.com/one-trait-that-set-the-earliest-christians-apart-from-the-surrounding-culture.

¹⁴ See "Polyamory Advocate: Gay Marriage 'Blazing the Marriage Equality Trail'", *US News & World Report*, June 24, 2103, www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/06/24/polyamorous-advocate-gay-marriage-blazing-the-marriage-equality-trail.

¹⁵ For a sober analysis for the church, which does not have its hands on the levers of cultural power or high-level influence, see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010).

pray for in the church and in me is a little less fashion and a bit more faithfulness, a little less compromise and a lot more courage, that we would faithfully read the Book through the lens of classic Trinitarian faith and not just stick our wet finger up to see which way the cultural wind is blowing so we can get out ahead of it and be relevant again. How pitiful is that? If we claim to follow Jesus, why are we so hesitant to offer the world a clear, crisp alternative to its insanities? I have an answer, but it's not encouraging. We want to be liked; we want to be in tune with intellectual trends; we do not want to live with the moral discipline the church has always required of disciples, which in this area may be conveniently summarized as *celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage*.¹⁶ We are more impressed with Vanity Fair than with Jesus Christ, so the church trembles as God let's us have our way.¹⁷

We are of fearful of being labeled intolerant or out of touch or- worse yet- *medieval*, whatever that means! We do not want to face embarrassment or discomfort for our convictions. But he did not come so we could have it easy; Jesus came to make us his own, a bit peculiar and curiously different, people who out-love and out-live and out-think the world because we've been captured by the truths of divine revelation. Here is the uncomfortable truth from where I sit: United Methodists- with clergy as our leaders- have become spiritually soft, morally undisciplined, biblically un-moored, doctrinally indifferent, and intellectually lazy. If you think I'm wrong on these fronts, please bring contrary evidence, but make sure you come with Bible and Discipline in hand, not *Psychology Today* or the latest polls. We listen to other disciplines, including science, and welcome their insights, but we evaluate them through the grid of this faith, and we always smoke out their assumptions and implications. They sharpen our thinking but don't define it. It's hard work being a thinking Christian in a world where image and feeling and spin and political correctness are everything, and where when you ask someone, "What do you *think*?" they often respond, "I *feel*..." Have you noticed the shift from thought and logic and argument to sentiment, to feelings, to sacred preferences that may not be challenged? It's not good! Feelings have little to do with whether something's true or not.

All churches are- like the first disciples- cracked clay vessels containing the treasures of divine revelation. There is nothing true in other religions that's also not already found within classic Christian faith, its history and practices. And the truths

¹⁶ *The Book of Discipline 2012*, Para. 2702.1a, page 776.

¹⁷ Note the threefold *God gave them up* of Romans 1:24, 26, 28.

of other faith claims are to be measured by the extent to which they're compatible with the truth that is Jesus Christ. This is what his resurrection means; Jesus is the coming of God into the world. All that is good and beautiful and true in other faith traditions finds its completion in him alone. All that is corrupt and sinful and evil in other faith traditions- and also in the church- is judged and purged by Jesus Christ. The church remains under the judgment of the One we follow; we are not exempt.

Our teaching is that every human being will stand before the risen Jesus at the last day. All Muslims, all Hindus, all Confucians, all secularists, all polytheists and atheists, all Christians, all Democrats and Republicans, all the *Smorgasbordians*! I will be there. So will you. We did not ask for this event; we didn't dream it up. No one set out to start a new religion for unemployed Jewish fishermen and tax collectors who lost their boats and government contracts. The church is not a conspiracy founded on an illusion. Our world's been invaded, and we've all been summoned. We've been visited by God the Son, then revisited after his death by the risen Jesus, who is the same person. The church is a God-inspired response to the God-initiated event of Jesus Christ. We are the witness to God's work and a community marching through time as a contradiction of all the world's schemes for self-perfection; we're a signpost pointing to the kingdom of God; we are the people through whom the risen Lord continues to do his work in the power of the Spirit. And it all depends on the resurrection of Jesus. William Neil summed it up this way:

“If the first Christians had not believed that Christ rose from the dead there would have been no church, no New Testament.... If Christianity had been founded merely on the moral teaching of Jesus, it would have flourished for a short time as a well-meaning deviation from Judaism. It would quickly have lost its identity amid the innumerable varieties of religion and philosophy... of the ancient world.”¹⁸

This is why a close reading of the appearance stories is worth the effort. They put us in touch with the evidence and its early interpretations. The writers were not lying. They were speaking of events that went beyond anything that had come before. It went something like this:

“What no one dreamed but him as happened. The crucified Jesus is now alive with new life because of God's action, and it puts everything in a

¹⁸ PreachingToday.com search under *Easter*.

new light. He came to us, not as a ghost but the same man with a marvelous new frame. He mocked us with humor, ‘Children, have you any fish?’ He filled our nets and cooked us breakfast. It was like before, only different. We are at his disposal, and he is not under our control. Come and see; he can make himself known to you as well.”¹⁹

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The Beginning And The Ending (vv. 1, 14)

The first and last verse of our passage are picture frame of sorts around the stories of the miraculous catch and breakfast on the beach. Verse 1 takes the active voice, “After this Jesus *revealed himself* again..,” whereas at the end verse 14 uses the passive, “This was now the third time that Jesus *was revealed* to his disciples....” *Revealed himself* and *was revealed*. Why the change of voice?

The risen Lord is not accessible on our terms. We do not make him appear by knowing the right words or rituals; he’s no genie in a bottle. A being that can be so manipulated is not God; those who think they can conjure him up are thinking like magicians. *Where* and *how* and *to whom* Jesus revealed himself was his decision. He lives in divine freedom and will not be manipulated. If he does not *reveal himself*, nothing happens. On the other hand, the passive voice that he *was revealed* means his appearances are in agreement with the Father and the Spirit. What the Father willed was carried out by his two hands, the Son and the Spirit in intimate cooperation.²⁰ Jesus *revealed himself*; he cannot be manipulated. Jesus *was revealed*; his actions are rooted in cooperation. We wait and expect him; we have a history together and many stories to tell, but he is not under our control; we are under his.

The Fishing Story (vv.2-6)

It is difficult to coordinate the timing of the Jerusalem appearances with those in Galilee that logically come later. There’s much we don’t know about the particulars of the weeks after Easter. All John says is “After this,” and we find ourselves transported north to the Sea of Galilee. Whereas the earlier two group appearances

¹⁹ My summary, based on John 21:1-14.

²⁰ This image of the Trinity, popular in the Eastern Church, is from Irenaeus.

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were to the ten without Thomas, then to the eleven with him present,²¹ this story names only seven disciples, perhaps because they'd all been fishermen: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John, plus two unnamed disciples. Whether the remaining four were with them we don't know. We are told the seven were *together*. No longer a group living in fear and mourning the death of a friend; they are now united by the risen Lord and wondering what's next. They live at the edge of awkward expectation, dealing with a reality no one beyond their circle comprehends. They were commissioned, but not yet released. They were in-between lives.

Peter's been criticized for his return to fishing. He'd earlier left his boat but apparently not sold it.²² But nothing from the risen Lord forbids them working to feed their families. Mark records Jesus promised a resurrection appearance in Galilee, and this is where we find them.²³ They went where he said go, and in the interim between encounters Peter- a man of action- does what he knows to do:

“I'm going fishing. Jesus knows where we are; he told us to come here, and until he chooses to pop in again I'm not going to sit around. I have a boat; I have nets; there are fish in the Galilee; I'm going to work.”

No one had a better idea, “We will go with you.” Peter was a man of plans and passion. His motto was “Don't just stand there, do something, even if it's wrong.” “They went out into the boat,” we read at the end of verse 3, “but that night caught nothing.” Seven men times ten hours is seventy hours with not a fish. Tired, frustrated, “Why did we follow Peter again?” Could it be the Lord himself who kept the fish away that night? I think so, in order to reinforce an earlier teaching where Jesus said *apart from me you can do nothing*.²⁴ Church leaders who cook up plans to keep themselves and others occupied have no right to expect the blessing of God. In an *activist* world, it's hard to be a *responsive* leader, responsive to Jesus that is!

²¹ John's count of three appearances in v.14 excludes the first appearance to Mary Magdalene (20:1-18), likely because- as the witness of a woman- it would be discounted by Jewish hearers. That the church remembered and retained it is a sign of integrity.

²² Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:1-11.

²³ Mark 14:28, 16:7.

²⁴ John 15:5.

Someone's been watching all night, one who from heaven views all the earth. "Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach." The appearances have a pattern: Jesus was *not there*, then he *is there*. We call them *appearance* stories; we could as easily call them *appearance-and-disappearance* stories. Jesus steps out of the kingdom of heaven and into our world, though still hidden. It's not enough for him to be there; he must *reveal himself* and *be revealed*.

The Lord's humor is in his shout from the shore, "Young men, have you any fish?" From the boat came a chorus over the waters, "No." He then issued a command and promise, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find...." To their credit they obeyed, and the results were enormous, "So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in for the quantity of fish." One word of living guidance from Jesus and circumstances change. A word of knowledge or prophecy, the power of healing, truth spoken in love, and everything changes. When he shows up, things change! When I show up, we do maintenance.

Our United Methodist Church has a problem. We have plans and programs but few new Christians. Could it be that American can-do pragmatism and activism has replaced living dependence on Jesus? It's humbling to learn that apart from him we can do nothing, that apart from him our best efforts and slickest plans lead only to weariness and frustration, as in a night without fish. A church that learns to listen to the Lord and enters the risks of obedience will find itself in the midst of abundance. It's why Pentecostals and Charismatics are growing with such dramatic effect around the world.²⁵ They believe Jesus guides the church with a living voice. In a world that prizes human initiative, quick results and non-mystical planning, it's hard to take time to wait and listen; it feels so powerless. *Time spent listening is not wasted time.*

It's an embarrassing question, whether to fishermen or pastors, "Lads, have you any fish?" To be a witness is not primarily about knowing all the answers. It's about listening to the voice and following instructions, dumb as they may sound, "Cast your net on the other side of the boat!" Ten feet away! Jesus knows who's lost in Greenwood; he knows who the Spirit's preparing to do business with the Father and the Son. Those hunches you get, that urging to undertake an awkward loving act, might it be him? How will you know unless you obey? Hundreds of gallons of wine at the Cana wedding, food for five thousand with leftovers, a net of precisely 153.

²⁵ For the full story see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford Press, 2002).

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fish. There are always shortages in the church, but the Lord's abundance is on the other side of obedience. When we listen, he lets us in on his secrets- like where the fish are. He's risen and still highly interactive. What if we listened?

The Recognition Scene (v.7).

The identity of the One on the shore was not revealed to all immediately but only to one, the same one who first believed- at least partially- on the basis of the empty tomb and collapsed linens.²⁶ This disciple had *the gift of discernment*, the gift to see who was behind events. Think of *spiritual radar*. The job of such is to be early spotters of where Jesus is active.²⁷ "The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'" We need this radar, so we can all join in.

The complementary gift of Peter is loving zeal and action. He tucks in his robe, leaps out and swims a hundred yards to shore. If it's Jesus, Peter wants to be near, in spite of three denials. Discernment is important; so are devotion and action. This is faith, not to run away in shame but to run towards Jesus in hope. What a precious thing when we do not hide our sins but run to Jesus as we are made aware. John's favorite hymn was *Open My Eyes, That I May See, Glimpses Of Truth Thou Hast For Me*, but it was Peter who sang *More Love To Thee O Christ, More Love To Thee*. The church needs *discernment* to spot the Lord and *devotion* to respond. None of us can do it alone; we need each other and all the gifts of the Spirit.

The Breakfast Story (vv.8-11)

Reflect with me on the raw *physicality* of the report. Seven men in a boat fishing all night, talking about the things men talk about. Stripped to the waist, tired, sweaty, wondering how to square the fact that Jesus has twice appeared with their present frustration. Which world is real? As the sun peeks over the Golan heights, they obey a distant voice and soon have a net of flopping fish too heavy to lift. John sees; Peter leaps. A hundred yards of rowing and dragging the net seems like a moment. On the beach a charcoal fire glows. The sizzle of fish grilling and the smell of bread baking

²⁶ 20:1-8.

²⁷ On the difference between WWJD (What would Jesus do?) And WIJD (What is Jesus doing?) see Andrew Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2007), 51.

fill the chilly dawn air. Mouths water. In the midst of such earthly realities stands the risen Jesus, “Bring some of the fish you have caught.” He doesn’t need their supplies, but he welcomes the gifts he gave them. We do not supply some deficiency for him, as if he could not act apart from us. And after a night like theirs, what they need is not a sermon but a meal. “Come and have breakfast..... Jesus came and took bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.” It’s a pure masculine moment, just as Jesus solo appearance to Mary was full of feminine devotion. We love him equally but differently, and the question is, “Have our churches become so feminized in style that men no longer find us attractive?”²⁸ Seven stinky men spitting our fish bones on the beach? Is that a picture of church we’re ready for?

CONCLUSION

We make an error if we dislodge Christian spirituality from the earthy realities of life: working and eating and marriage and living with animals and fish with whom we share the earth. Jesus does not dismiss the mundane; he gives it fresh dignity. Look at Peter. His idea failed, but in the presence of the risen Jesus he finds new strength to swim to shore and haul in a net six others couldn’t lift into the boat. Jesus left as suddenly as he came. What was left were hot coals, a pile of bones, seven full bellies, and enough fish to sell at the market for a pocketful of cash for each. You go your way, you pay. You go his way, he provides.

This one thing, the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the multiple confirming appearances that explain the empty tomb, distinguishes Christianity from all other religious systems and sets Jesus above all others. His followers remain faulty and compromised- sometimes even outright embarrassments because we look so little like him- but the One we follow is historically real and divinely certified, and to him we point. Jesus is alive and fully trustworthy, as his best friends learned again that dawn on the shore of the Galilee. It means the whole of his life is the definitive revelation of God. He knows our good ideas apart from him don’t work. He knows we get weary. He knows where the fish are, where the people are who are waiting to be found. I want to be his follower, his friend, on call and available for assignments. I want some of those moments in my life, and when I think about those I’ve had, my heart feels as if its about to explode. How about you? Got something better? I didn’t think so. Why don’t we try this one again? Why if we listened for his voice?

²⁸ David Murrow at churchformen.com has some great books and ideas.
