

## Resurrection Encounters: Breakfast at Tiberias

John 21:1-14

What's your best "fish story"?

I'm not much of a fisherman myself, but my brother Josh told me his best fishing experience was catching a fish bigger than he was tall. It was a huge halibut caught up in northern British Columbia along the Pacific coast. Oh, by the way, he was only 7 at the time.

My Dad told me his best fish story was the time he caught a fish (*demo with arms*) THIS far from shore.

Today's gospel reading is a fish story of epic proportions. It happened sometime after the events of Easter Sunday. Peter and the disciples decide to go fishing.

It's a strange move. Shouldn't they be busy planning their world mission? Setting up a training school? Or at least doing some further Bible study?

It's possible that the disciples are making their first attempt at getting back to "normal". That might explain why they are back out in the boats fishing again. Perhaps their families have been telling them it's time to get back to work and starting getting bread on the table. But I think it's also possible that the disciples were looking for Jesus. They were hoping they could hear his guidance one last time; that he would tell them "what now," and the path before them would be laid out clearly.

Whatever the case, they went back to the familiar. They went back to the life they knew before Jesus, but they also went back to the place where they had met Jesus so many times before—the place where he had called them, the place where he had calmed the storm and called Peter to walk across the water, the place where he had multiplied the loaves and fish and fed 5,000 people. The disciples surely remembered those things as they shoved off for another fishing adventure on what John refers to as the Sea of Tiberias but is also known as the Sea of Galilee.

Maybe it wasn't a conscious decision by the disciples, but I believe that somewhere deep down, they were longing to encounter Jesus again, and

that meant going back to the place they had encountered him before. And the same has to be true for us, too. A great deal of the maintenance and growth of our relationship with Christ comes from having encounters with Christ, and going to that place where we know his presence in the most tangible ways. That's part of the reason we are here in worship, isn't it? Through this "set-aside" hour each week, even in this particular space, we enter God's midst in a special way and have encounters with the living Christ that cannot happen in any other way or in any other place.

But there's other places we go to encounter Christ, too, right? For me there is something about being by water that refreshes my spirit and allows me to meet Christ anew. Even a walk in the woods can remind me of the gifts of God's creation and all of God's abundant provision. Maybe for you it's through music, singing songs that remind us of God's power, and presence, and blessing in our lives.

Wherever your "place" is, wherever you need to go to meet Christ and bask in his presence, be sure to go there often because that is how your relationship with Christ is nurtured and sustained.

As much as this passage reminds us of our need to go regularly to the places where we encounter Christ, it is also an assurance that when we need Christ, he will make his presence known.

Here the disciples are, back in the fishing boats again, and yet again they've fished all night without any luck. And even if their underlying purpose was something besides fishing, when you get out on the lake with your nets, you want to catch something!

So once again, as the sun peaks over the horizon, they are bemoaning a laborious night with nothing to show for it. (Maybe this was a sign that going back to their old way of life wasn't the right direction?) These men are probably feeling frustrated, tired, discouraged, maybe even afraid, and empty, and worthless.

When, all of a sudden, a mystery man on the shore calls out, "Hey little boys, didn't you catch anything?" We get the sense that maybe Jesus is razzing the disciples a bit, but we need to remember that at this point, the

disciples don't know who this man is, he is a stranger and they didn't recognize him at first. When we are seeking Christ's presence and guidance, we always have to pay attention and listen carefully because we may very well be surprised, Jesus often works in mysterious ways.

And sure enough, what is the next thing Christ says to the disciples? He tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. On the surface, this suggestion is just plain stupid. Why would there be fish on one side of the boat and not the other? It's just not logical.

But this isn't about logic. What's important here is to recognize that when we feel alone, and frustrated, and discouraged, Christ will help us. His appearance will be unexpected, it might not even be obvious at first, but Jesus wants to be our guide. He wants to be the one who encourages us, prepares us, equips us. He wants to guide us in the kind of life that gives life. And the thing is, Jesus knows exactly what we need. Maybe even better than we ourselves know, Jesus knows where we need to cast the nets, he knows how to give nourishment and fulfillment.

It kind of amazes me that the disciples did it. They threw the net out on the other side of the boat and immediately had so many fish – 153 large ones - they couldn't even pull the net into the boat. Talk about a fish story.

There's lots of speculation about the significance of that haul, 153 fish. Scholars have tried to give many explanations for this number. At the time of Jesus' ministry, it was thought that there were 153 nationalities. Some believed there were 153 different kinds of fish in the net, which would represent all the different people. There's some thought that perhaps this number is symbolic of the new, young churches that had grown up all around the empire by the time John wrote his gospel in about 80 AD.

Based on the fact that John is a detailed recorder, I would suggest the number 153 simply means that they caught a lot of fish. The number was memorable because the moment was memorable – much like we remember significant numbers like our wedding anniversary or children's birthdays or significant events like 9/11.

The abundance itself is important and reminiscent of other examples in John's gospel. When Jesus is involved there is an abundance of blessing remember the abundant volume of wine at the wedding in Cana and the feeding of the five thousand with just a little bread and fish.

It was this abundant catch that got their attention - it evoked a memory of an abundant catch they experienced a few years earlier when Jesus first called them to be disciples and to be fishers of people. It is a reminder to those disciples and all who read this story that this is about our mission, our call to be fishers of people, to seek those who have no church home, or no relationship with Christ.

This reminder is made even more clear in what happens next. When they all come ashore, they find a charcoal fire with a fish and some bread. A charcoal fire – the same kind of fire Peter stood near when he denied knowing Jesus. But what Jesus says next is not “Some friend you turned out to be” or “I’m really disappointed in you” not even “you let me down.” Jesus asks them to bring some of the fish they just caught.

This may seem to be a strange request – after all we are fully aware of the abundance that Jesus is capable of providing. But I believe this was an important lesson for those disciples and for us. Because I believe Jesus continues both to provide for us but also asks us to contribute what we have. And that invitation to contribute – of our time, our talent, our insights, our passion, our very lives – both honors us by drawing us into Christ's mission of fishing for people while simultaneously giving us the gift of meaningful, purposeful work.

There are many great reminders for us as disciples in this epic fish story. But we must remember that it all begins with our confession of faith - “Jesus, you are my Lord; lead me, guide me, help me to do your will.” Amen

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