

3 Easter – Year C – April 18, 2010
Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19
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“Gone fishing” is a popular metaphor for vacationers, or for those of us who have moved into retirement. “Gone fishing” is also a metaphor for doing what we want, taking time out for a well-earned rest, perhaps after a lifetime of hard work, often raising a family, and caring for grandchildren. It evokes for us thoughts and images of recreation and relaxation, good old R&R in other words. Our personal “gone fishing” experiences can be anything from the literal fishing trip, to an RV road trip, reading a good book out on the deck, to all kinds of wonderful hobbies – golfing, painting, hiking, you name it. All the things we associate with the antithesis of that other four-letter word – work!

For Simon Peter and the other disciples who have returned to Galilee, and in particular, the Sea of Galilee, otherwise called the Sea of Tiberias, going fishing means something very different. For this group of bereft disciples, who have been visited by the resurrected Jesus at least twice before, going fishing is a return to old familiar work habits. Given the importance of light and dark throughout the Gospel of John, it is no surprise then that this desire to go back to their old lives occurs in the late evening. Darkness is always the time for the world’s ways to beckon and tempt. In John, darkness represents the time when the powers of this world hold sway. It also represents a lack of direction and purpose with respect to spiritual matters, perhaps akin to John of the Cross’ dark night of the soul. In terms of daily life, for you and me, it’s the equivalent of slipping back into our old habits as our New Year’s resolutions begin to fall by the wayside if they haven’t already. In spiritual terms, it may well be like gradually letting our Lenten spiritual disciplines slide down our daily or weekly list of priorities now that Easter has come. For Simon Peter and the other disciples, including us, it is a matter of whether we have taken to heart what we learned as we walked with Jesus. It is about taking a risk, stepping out in trust, or just being intentional about continuing the good work that the Lord has begun in each of us.

Just after daybreak – a new day dawns for the disciples and especially for Simon Peter. Our resurrected Lord is standing on the beach and calls out to the weary fishermen. “Children, you have no fish, have you?” It is not so much a question, as a statement of fact. As we should have expected, their **night’s** work was fruitless. It was their old selves, working the lake in autopilot in the depths of darkness, without Godly purpose. They were not testing their new vocations, the new calling that Jesus had prepared them for, and so this night’s fishing trip was all labor done outside of God’s will, and Jesus’ commission. The result? Empty nets. That is until Jesus tells them to let down their nets for a catch, which by all accounts turns out to be huge. Their obedience to the Lord is immediately rewarded. Is this, once again, a deed of power by which Jesus is recognizable? It is for John. And it begs the question of why the disciples don’t immediately recognize Jesus. He has, after all, appeared to them before. He has breathed the Holy Spirit into them, empowering them to be sent out as God the Father sent Jesus into the world. Look around. Everyone here today has encountered our risen Lord at least once, probably multiple times in our lives. How many of us can honestly say that we recognized Him immediately, or even on reflection? If the disciples who hung out with Jesus in the flesh, so to speak, had a hard time staying focused, is it any wonder we do too? The complexity and busyness of our lives today is yet another reason that we must work harder at keeping God front and center, and make time for prayer, Bible study, and our spiritual disciplines, because the distractions are endless.

Now we have the strangest scene of all. “When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.” That’s our Kodak moment for today! Peter grabbing his tunic, hastily tying it around himself, then throwing himself into the sea, swimming for the shore with his usual leap before he looks type of faith. John, on the other hand was quite content to simply acknowledge that Jesus was on the beach, without any other action. We’ll come back to Peter

dressing himself in a moment, but first let's examine these two very different responses to Jesus' presence. John is the first to recognize the Lord, but manifests no action in response to that moment of faith. Peter is the first to act, simply trusting that John spoke the truth, without really knowing it was so. Neither understanding alone, which is John's response to Jesus' presence, nor action alone – that is Peter's reactivity – constitutes authentic faith. Both are needed. In this scene Peter and John represent two distinct and necessary aspects of faith: a deep heartfelt recognition of Jesus, as well as our acts of faith in response to that knowledge and the Lord's presence in our lives. In another sense, John is also showing us that we each have gifts of the Holy Spirit that God intends for us to share in community, to build up the Body of Christ, and in order to love one another and our neighbors. The complementary, harmonizing and balancing nature of our spiritual gifts provides further evidence of just how much we need each other. Community in the Body of Christ facilitates our success in achieving our God-given goals, and helps each of us to grow, always becoming more fully the person that God intends us to be. Whenever we read John's Gospel it's helpful to reflect on the deeper meanings conveyed as much as the more obvious.

Now back to Peter and those clothes! Given the significance of Jesus' conversation with Peter on the beach, there are at least a couple of possibilities to consider. The more obvious one is the Jewish custom of greeting, which requires the greeter to be clothed. It may have been Peter's desire that he be formally attired in order to offer Jesus an honorable greeting on the beach. One other alternative is that we have an allusion to Adam and Eve, who after eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, realized that they were naked, were ashamed, and clothed themselves. Peter is all too aware that after all his protestations of being ready to die with Jesus, he ends up denying Him three times in order to save his skin. In the Garden, God says to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" It is a loaded question. It's not about a physical locale, but more about God asking what's going on in our relationship – where are we exactly, what's changed? On the beach, Jesus asks Peter three times, "do you love me?" Perhaps Jesus is really saying something like, "forgiveness and mercy are God's gracious gifts to you Peter, and because love covers a multitude of sins, I need to know whether you still love God in and through Me." We cannot neglect to notice the primacy of love in all of John's writings. We cannot be disciples unless we love God and love one another. Peter's shame and guilt is not what God desires in order for Peter to serve the Lord according to God's will. Carrying around a burden of shame or brokenness for any of us is damaging and unnecessary. You are forgiven. I am forgiven. Our sins are forgiven. Peter's three-fold confirmation of his love for Jesus is punctuated by Jesus' three-fold commissioning of Peter as a leader of, and provider for, God's children. You and I are also commissioned to serve the Lord according to His will.

In the prologue of John, we read that all who receive the Lord, and believe in His name, are given power to become children of God (John 1:12). We have each received the Lord. We believe in His name. You and I are children of God. In this epilogue to John's Gospel, we have a clear vision of God's desire that we hold on to love, and let go of old, fruitless shame and guilt. In Christ, we are a new creation, the old has passed away. We have a clear path to follow. Jesus tells us, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Jesus says to Peter, and to us, don't go back to old dead-end ways, our future lies in following Christ, and truly embracing God's love and forgiveness. We can put out the "gone fishing" signs, because we are effectively retired from our old lives. If we are willing to follow God's way, to be co-creators in our new lives in Christ, we can be sure that we'll be catching a lot more than the proverbial one that got away. Are you ready to follow Jesus all the way?

Amen.