

Have You Caught Any Fish?

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, May 17, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [John 21:1-14](#)

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Whenever I read this resurrection story, I can't but help but think of the old joke: Did you know that Jesus was a flamenco choreographer? It's right there in John, when he told the disciples, "Castanets on the other side of the boat."

John 21 reads a little like a postscript to the gospel. Chapter 20 ends with what reads like a nice summation, a solid period at the end of a story. And then there's chapter 21. John isn't clear on how much time is passed. As Ceci noted, the chapter 20 accounts of the appearances of the resurrected Jesus have a clear timeline. The timeline in chapter 21 isn't clear. John doesn't say how much time has transpired between Jesus revealing his resurrected self to Thomas and the other disciples and this incident on the beach. As I read the story, I noticed that I wanted it to say that it was a week later, or two weeks later, or four weeks later. I wanted John to say that the incident on the beach took place on a Sunday. The resurrection appearances in chapter 20 are on Sundays – Easter Sunday in the morning and the evening, and then the following Sunday. There's something metaphoric about the resurrected Jesus showing up on Sundays.

John doesn't say what day of the week it is or how much time is transpired. It's been enough time for the disciples, at least the seven in this story, to have left Jerusalem and traveled to Galilee. They've gone back home; they've gone to the place where everything began for them. Barbara Brown Taylor notices that the fact that only 7 of the disciples are together might be a sign that "they were already coming apart at the seams, some of them going in one direction while others went another."¹

I'm not sure when it was that I first started thinking of Peter's announcement, "I'm going fishing," was a sign of his grief. It makes sense. When you don't know what to do, you go back to what's familiar. Fishing was familiar. Fishing would give him time to contemplate, time to do something physical that didn't require too much attention. Peter and Andrew, James and John – they knew fishing. It was their occupation. Well, it was their occupation until Jesus showed up. Maybe Peter's decision to go fishing was more than just a decision to sit on the water and contemplate. Maybe it was a sign that Peter was thinking about returning to his former life, going back to something that was clear and concrete.

"[Jesus] was gone, after all. They had not seen him since Jerusalem, and while that was a powerful time none of them will ever forget, it is time to get on with life. Memory is one thing, but the future is another. His life on earth may have ended, but theirs have not, and they have to do something about getting food on their tables and roofs over their heads. He is gone, and it is time for them to start looking after themselves again."²

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The First Breakfast," *Gospel Medicine*, (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), 85.

² *Ibid*, 85-86.

So, it's back to fishing, back to what they know. They fish. They fish all night, and it doesn't work. They don't catch a single thing. "So now what? They cannot go forward and they cannot go back. All they can do is sit in the dark and watch the sky change color as the sun rises behind the hills."³

I guess they saw him before they heard him. A distant figure on the beach, he called out to them. "Have you caught any fish?" Only that's not what he shouted. That's what I would have shouted, trying to start a conversation or to inquire about the conditions. Jesus didn't ask if they'd caught any fish. He asked for confirmation that they had failed to catch any fish. "Children, you have no fish, have you?"⁴

They confirmed that they've caught nothing, and Jesus suggests that they try a slightly different strategy. "Try casting your nets on the other side of the boat." They do. They follow his advice, and everything changes. "The water begins to boil, all at once so dense with fish that some of them are pushed right out of the water, their shiny fins glinting in the morning light. It is *deja vu* [all over] again: the boats, the nets, the stranger calling out to them. It is not the end after all, or else the end has led them back to the beginning again.

"It is the Lord!" says the beloved disciple,... and what has been a dismal midnight scene becomes pure daybreak pandemonium. Peter throws himself into the water, leaving the others with all the hard work. They scrambled for their oars, catching him just as he reaches the beach, and what all of them arrived to find is a charcoal fire with fish on it, and bread, and Jesus their beloved cook."⁵

"Come and have breakfast," he says to them. "He is not serving supper this time," Barbara Brown Taylor writes. "That was the last meal of their old life together. This is the first meal of their new life together – a resurrection breakfast, prepared by the only one who knows the recipe."⁶

Maybe that's why I want this story to take place on a Sunday. This is one more communion story. The feeding of the multitudes in the wilderness with bread and fish – that's a communion story. Gathering with the disciples in the upper room for their last supper together – that's a communion story. The resurrected Jesus being made known to the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the breaking of the bread – that's a communion story. And here on the beach, Jesus cooks up a new communion story, a communion breakfast of bread and fish.

Taylor points out, "This story is full of clues for those times [in our lives] when we too are marooned on the sea in the middle of the night, afraid that we have come to the end of something without any idea of how to begin again. In the first place, it's probably a good idea to pay attention to strangers, especially those who seemed to know things about you that they really have no way of knowing. Whether they're giving you unsolicited advice about where to cast your nets or just standing there looking at you with eyes like daybreak,

³ *Ibid*, 86.

⁴ *Ibid*, 86.

⁵ *Ibid*, 86-87.

⁶ *Ibid*, 87.

it is probably a good idea to pay attention to them since Jesus has a whole closet full of disguises.

“Another clue that he may be somewhere around is a sudden change in fortune – not rags to riches, necessarily, since he actually seems to prefer rags to riches – but a sudden change in the way your life looks to you. One moment it looks hopeless to you and the next you see possibilities you never saw before. One moment your problems look too big to be budgeted and the next you discover handles on them you never knew were there before. One moment that net looks empty and the next it does not. There is something wriggling in it where there is nothing just a moment before. It may be a little or it may be a lot, but it is *alive* – a living thing where there was nothing but darkness and death before.”⁷

You gotta love Peter, throwing on some clothing and then throwing himself in the water, rushing to get to the beach, rushing to get to Jesus. And you gotta admire the unnamed, beloved disciple, the one who recognizes who it must be on the shore, who it must be who is calling disciples back to the abundance of their new lives. May there be some Peter and some beloved disciple in us all. Amen.

⁷ *Ibid*, 88.