



THE CHURCH OF THE  
RESURRECTION  
WASHINGTON, DC

## STARTING OVER WITH JESUS

John 21:1-14

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According to the New Testament, the earliest Christians in and around Jerusalem chose to meet weekly not on Saturday, the Jewish sabbath, which would have been easiest. They also didn't choose Fridays, even though Jesus' crucifixion occurred on a Friday. Instead, they chose to meet every week on Sunday. Why? Because Jesus' resurrection early on the first day of the week began to change the whole world, and they wanted to start over with Jesus.

As the Gospel spread out from Jerusalem, to Judea, and Samaria, and on to the ends of the earth, the church began to commemorate Easter each year around the same time as Passover. What developed wasn't only one day of celebration, but an entire season extending for fifty days. For many, Easter is now long-forgotten; but in our tradition we're still right in the middle of the Easter season. And while we're certainly enjoying all that we had missed out on during Lent, catching up on feasting isn't the rationale behind the Easter season. The purpose, rather, is to focus our attention on Jesus' resurrection and the new life we share because of it.

The single most important event in human history is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. So important that we remember it every Sunday. So important that we meditate on it for seven weeks every spring. So important that this church is named for it. Why is Jesus' resurrection so important? Because it's the fulcrum of history. It is the turning point in the story of the world, the first concrete evidence of a happy ending instead of tragedy.

We all are intimately familiar with the brokenness of the world. Not one of us is untouched by it. We've all suffered because of it; we've also all sinned and contributed to it. If not for Jesus, I would have lost all hope long ago. But Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, and on Easter Sunday he rose from the dead. Because he lives, we have hope for the renewal of ourselves as well as everything broken in our world.

The Apostle Paul was an eyewitness to the rapid spread of the Gospel throughout Asia minor and into southern Europe. He saw Christianity transforming people, families, communities, institutions. In Paul's words—the "whole cosmos" was being transformed (Col 1:6). Paul traced it all back to Jesus' resurrection. He wrote: "[Jesus] is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent" (Col 1:18). In other words, the transformation of

the world began with Jesus' resurrection. That was the first light of dawn, the first flower of spring, the first laughter after all the tears.

Paul went on to say that in Jesus, "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:18-20). The victory over sin and death that Jesus won on the cross began working outward into all creation that first Easter morning. And "all things" in heaven and on earth will be reconciled as the resurrection of Jesus advances.

The resurrection reminds us that the long reign of sin and death is coming to an end. The powers of darkness are retreating before the kingdom of God. But as Paul wrote, the reconciliation of all things isn't a violent revolution. The bloodshed already happened, when Jesus died on the cross. Now, instead of fomenting violent upheaval, the risen Lord Jesus is "making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:20).

## **AMBASSADORS OF JESUS' RESURRECTION**

How is Jesus making peace? How is he reconciling all things in heaven and on earth? Through his followers, who have been given "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). Those who believe have the privilege of serving as ambassadors of the risen king and thus participating in his reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth. If you have come to faith, having been reconciled with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus, then you too are a minister. You're a minister of reconciliation, appointed to share the peace of Christ with the world.

John chapter 21 serves as the epilogue to John's Gospel. It's a wonderful story of breakfast on the beach with Jesus, giving us a glimpse of what it's like to be Jesus' ministers of reconciliation. In the prior twenty chapters, John told the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. He told this story primarily in terms of seven miraculous signs, the last and most important sign being Jesus' resurrection from the dead. At the end of chapter twenty, John wrapped up the story in this way:

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John 20:30-31*

John told the story in chapters 1-20, particularly the story of the seven signs, so that his readers might believe in Jesus and have life in his name. Now, for those who do come to faith in Jesus, there's work to do. John therefore added an epilogue in order to paint a picture of what it looks like to be an ambassador of King Jesus. In this message, as we consider the first half of the chapter, I want to show you simply that our ministry depends on communion with him.

## THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION BEGINS WITH JESUS HIMSELF

John begins the epilogue by emphasizing Jesus' self-revelation to his disciples.

*After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. John 21:1*

Jesus visited seven of his disciples on the shore that morning, sometime after Easter, in the days preceding his ascension.<sup>1</sup> John's word choice is important. Twice in this verse he says that Jesus "revealed" himself to them. John also returns to this same idea in v. 14:

*This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. John 21:14.*

Jesus didn't publish a manifesto. He came to them himself, in person, in the flesh. Jesus revealed himself to his disciples, because the ministry of reconciliation begins with him.

It's been almost two thousand years since Jesus' death and resurrection. Since then, a rich body of theology has developed encompassing the good news of redemption and justification and adoption and eternal life and so on—all wonderful ideas that Christians believe. I love the study of theology, and commend it to you for your own growth in understanding. However, sometimes the great ideas of Christianity get piled so high that we lose sight of the person all the ideas are about. Behind all our theology is a living, breathing man, with scars in his hands and feet and side. The risen Lord Jesus is what theology is about.

There are many families of churches around the world, and sometimes our family of churches is describes as "Gospel-centered." It's a description that suits us, so long as it means that we're centered on Jesus, who is himself the message of the Gospel. If, however, Gospel-centered means a set of ideas describing the inner-working of redemption, then I want to say, "No, even though that's very important, that's not as important as Jesus himself. He's the center of our church." When we "share the Gospel," our message is about a person, the risen Lord Jesus.

In John 21:1-14, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples, because mission begins with him. And it continues with him. Those who go out into the world as Jesus' ambassadors must remain in continual contact with him. That's what ambassadors do.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sea of Tiberias is another name for the Sea of Galilee, the big lake nestled in the hills of northern Palestine.

## **NO COMMUNION, NO FRUIT; BUT WITH JESUS, A BOUNTIFUL HARVEST**

What happened that morning when Jesus revealed himself to his disciples? John tells us in vv 2-3 that there were seven disciples there, and Peter was still their leader, even though he had broken his promise (John 13) and denied Jesus three times (John 18). These seven disciples still followed Peter. When Peter said, "I'm going fishing," the other six tagged along.

Yet it wasn't a fruitful mission. Although several of them were professional fishermen, they caught nothing. Not a single fish. Isn't that odd?

As we've worked our way through John's Gospel, we've often seen John's affinity for symbolism. In his introduction, John introduced Jesus as the "Word made flesh." Over the course of the story, Jesus described himself as Living Water, and Bread from Heaven. He's also the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Good Shepherd, and the resurrection and the life. He's also the temple that was destroyed and rebuilt in three days. All this symbolism throughout John's Gospel suggests a deeper meaning behind their fishing trip.

Of course the disciples could have had a bad night out; even professionals come back empty-handed every now and then. But most interpreters down through the centuries say that the empty net symbolizes something more.

John's Gospel was the last of the four to be written, and John wrote it in conversation with the other three Gospels. John leaves out stories like Jesus' baptism, and his visit to Mary and Martha, and his institution of the Lord's Supper. John expects his readers to already know those stories from Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Another story John expects readers to know is one of the earliest episodes from Jesus' ministry in Galilee, when Peter and Andrew, James and John first left everything to follow him. Jesus first met them while walking along the shore of the same Sea of Tiberias. In his telling, Luke mentioned that Peter had not caught anything the night before. Then Jesus joined them in the boat, and told them where to cast his net, and suddenly they had a massive haul. At that point, Peter fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." But Jesus said in response, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (Luke 5:1-11). Their new mission, "from now on," would be spreading the good news about King Jesus, and welcoming others into his kingdom.

When Jesus was arrested, Peter denied him three times, and all the disciples scattered. Then when Jesus died, so did their mission of catching people. That's why, after the resurrection, Jesus recommissioned his disciples. In the previous chapter of John's Gospel, when Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter evening, he recommissioned them saying, "As the Father

has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). Just as Jesus had once invited the disciples to follow him, from now on the disciples were to invite others to follow the Lord.

Today's lesson is the very next chapter after the recommissioning in John 20. And it's startling to find here, just a few verses later, that the disciples aren't fishing for new disciples. Instead, they went right back to where Jesus had first found them. Not surprisingly, apart from Jesus, they were encountering the very same results.

What was the problem? No communion, no fruit. They went out on their own without the Lord. Jesus wasn't part of their mission. That's why, after being up all night, they had nothing to show for all their work. You can't be an effective ambassador of the risen king if you're not in communion with the king.

Thankfully a new day has come. Jesus died, but he rose again on the third day. The resurrection of Jesus changed everything. John reminds his readers of the new dawn in v 4:

*Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. John 21:4*

It was still daybreak, and they were a hundred yards offshore, so it makes sense that the disciples didn't recognize Jesus on the beach. Yet they also weren't looking for him, were they? They were on their own, and didn't expect Jesus to turn up.

*Jesus asked them, "Children, have you any fish?" To which they answered, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net on 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 of the quantity of fish. John 21:5-6*

Jesus had already given instructions to the disciples on Easter evening (John 20:21), but by returning to their old lives it appears that they weren't following them. This time, however, they obeyed Jesus' word, and they caught so many fish that they weren't able to pull in the net. It was then that they remembered: this had happened before, the same place, the same boat. Without Jesus, no fruit. But with Jesus, a bountiful harvest.

## **NAKED AND ASHAMED**

John, the beloved disciple, said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Then Peter got dressed and threw himself into the sea. Some say that Peter was in such a hurry to see Jesus that he jumped in and swam to shore. I'm not sure that's right. Let me show you why I think otherwise.

John writes in v 7 that Peter was γυμνός, which means naked or bare. In the ESV translation it says that he was "stripped for work." If Peter was planning to swim to Jesus, it doesn't make

much sense that he would have put on his overcoat first. Usually it's the opposite, isn't it? You take off your outer clothing and then jump in the water.

If Peter was in such a hurry, would he have taken the extra time to get dressed? I'm inclined to think that this was shame at work. The chief of the apostles hadn't taken the lead with the mission that Jesus had given them. They were out fishing, but they weren't fishing for disciples. The last time Jesus guided them to a miraculous catch of fish, Peter fell down at Jesus' feet and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." This time, Peter responded like Adam and Eve in Eden when they realized that they were naked and they covered themselves.

John writes, v 7, that Peter threw himself into the sea, which makes me think of the most famous Old Testament story of a boat on the sea. In that story, Jonah fled from his mission as God's ambassador, but God pursued him in a storm. When the sailors realized that it was because of Jonah that they were in grave danger, they reluctantly threw him into the sea. Then the storm immediately subsided, and the sailors came to faith. Meanwhile, in the belly of the whale, Jonah repented of his waywardness and came back to the Lord. Then God had the whale deposit Jonah on shore so that he might get on with his mission.

John doesn't say how Peter made it to shore. I don't think John is suggesting that Peter was swallowed by a whale. On the other hand, I also don't think that Peter freestyled it back to shore in order to be the first on the beach with Jesus. It seems that what happened to Peter is what happens to everyone caught off guard by shame: he floundered. In this instance, he foolishly put on his overcoat and threw himself in the water. This is the shearing effect of shame.<sup>2</sup> It turns us into nitwits. It happens to me all the time. We're all hard-wired to respond this way when caught off-guard by shame. It's been the same ever since the Garden of Eden.

Jesus will reinstate Peter in John 21:15-19. When we look at that section (next week), we'll also explore more fully Peter's three denials of Jesus on the night Jesus was arrested. We won't go into those details right now, but suffice it to say that Peter had good reason to be ashamed. Thus far in John's Gospel there is no indication that Jesus and Peter had been able to repair their ruptured relationship. That's very likely the reason why Peter went back home to Galilee, back to catching fish, rather than going out on mission inviting others to faith in Jesus. Peter was still lost in that bewildering wasteland of his own sin and shame, feeling profoundly unfit to lead in the ministry of reconciliation because he himself wasn't right with the Lord.

Jesus had every right to leave Peter and the others to stew in their sin and shame. But he didn't. In his letter to the Romans, Paul said that, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." [Rom 5:8] God doesn't want for us to stew in sin and

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<sup>2</sup> Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*. IntVarsity Press, 2015. Ch. 3.

shame. He loves us, and he wants us to start over with Jesus. Don't cover and hide. Don't miss out on the life that he has for you. Come to him and be reconciled, so that you can get on with what he made you to be and do. Confess your sins, receive his forgiveness, and come feast with him.

## ALL IS GIFT

*The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." John 21:8-10.*

Jesus had enough to feed them all. He was, after all, the one who provided bread and fish for five thousand on the other side of the lake a couple of years earlier (John 6). Nevertheless, Jesus invited them to contribute some fish that they had caught—with Jesus' help. Just a subtle reminder that all we have comes from him anyway. All is gift, and the sooner we come to understand that we live in complete dependence upon Jesus for all things, the sooner we will be able to enjoy his peace and get on with his resurrection mission. "Do not be anxious," Jesus said, "about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will wear.... but seek first God's kingdom, and all these things will be added to you" (Luke 12:22, 31). Jesus says, Trust me. If I conquered death, don't you think I can meet your needs too?

When Jesus invited them to contribute some of their fish that they caught, Peter suddenly reappeared to haul the net ashore. Perhaps he saw this as a way that he could help out and save some face. In any event, when they tallied their haul there were 153 large fish in all.<sup>3</sup> Jesus once again provided far more abundantly than all that anyone could ask or imagine, because that's his way. When you love someone, you don't give them just the bare minimum. Instead, you lavish them with much more. And that's why John promised that those who believe in Jesus will find life in his name. The bounty of Jesus' resurrection spills out of the nets into our lives, so that we have all we need and much more.

In v 12, Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Then Jesus did for his disciples what he does for all believers whenever we gather for worship with him. Jesus fed them.

*Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. John 21:13.*

It sounds like the words of institution in the Lord's Supper, doesn't it? That's intentional on John's part; he wants readers to recognize a pattern of word and sacrament in this story.

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<sup>3</sup> There are a great many theories regarding the significance of the 153 fish, and it's fascinating reading all the ways this has been interpreted over the centuries. However, there has never been a clear consensus about what it means.

First, the word of the Lord. That morning, Jesus gave the disciples several instructions to follow: *Cast the net on the right side of the boat (21:6). Bring some of the fish that you have just caught (21:10). Come and have breakfast (21:12).* Each time they obeyed and drew nearer to the Lord. Now that they are so close that they can touch Jesus and one another, here comes the second movement: Jesus breaks bread and feeds them (21:13).

By the time John wrote his Gospel, this same pattern of word and sacrament had already developed in the early church's worship. Every Sunday the believers gathered first to read the Scriptures aloud and hear a sermon from the reading. In so doing, they drew closer to the Lord, finding forgiveness and resurrection life in him. Then, secondly, they would gather around Jesus' table, breaking bread in Jesus' name, and experiencing the intimacy that comes through reconciliation with him. This same pattern of word and sacrament has been happening in churches around the world for nearly 2,000 years. It's why we continue this same pattern today, because our ministry as his ambassadors depends on communion with him.

Like that breakfast on the beach with Jesus, our weekly communion not only draws us near to Jesus, but it also has a way of grounding our imagination in the new reality of the resurrection. Because he lives, and we feast with him, we're able to go out from here and share the peace of Christ wherever he takes us.

Let me share with you one more picture of what this looks like. When the Civil War began, a man named Nat Fuller was widely regarded as the top chef in Charleston, SC. He was also a slave, until Charleston fell to the Union army in February, 1865. In the months that followed, the city's 15,000 occupants suffered massive shortages of basic goods, barely surviving on a daily rice ration. In late April during those difficult days, Nat Fuller somehow gathered the fixins for a sumptuous meal. He took the initiative to invite the most prominent and influential white Charlestonians to join him and other African-American leaders for dinner. On the evening of the feast, whites and blacks sat together for the first time at tables giving toasts and singing songs. It certainly wasn't the end of injustice in Charleston. The dinner was, nevertheless, the dawn of a new era. "For the first time in South Carolina an African American stood as host at a table around which blacks and whites sat subject to his hospitality and generosity."<sup>4</sup> Nat Fuller's feast, hosted by one who had suffered so much, not only set the tone for reconciliation after the war, but also lay the groundwork for a new civil society in Charleston, one in which grace triumphs evil.

On June 17, 2015, a twenty-one year old white supremacist entered Mother Emanuel, the oldest African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. Twelve people were gathered there for a Wednesday night prayer meeting. As they began to pray, the man pulled out a gun and shot them, one by one. Six women and three men died that night, as sin once more raged against the kingdom of God. But the memory of grace triumphing over evil was fresh in the

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<sup>4</sup> David S. Shields, Nat Fuller's Feast, Common-Place Vol 15. No 4. Summer 2015.

minds of the community. Only four weeks prior, Charlestonians had gathered to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Nat Fuller's feast. So when the family and survivors of the massacre at Mother Emanuel Church chose to forgive the man who had murdered nine of their own, it somehow made sense. If you remember the media response, most of the watching world thought they were nuts. But within a community whose identity has been shaped by the lavish generosity of Jesus, death cannot have the last word. Grace will triumph over evil.

A few weeks after the first Easter, Jesus gave the very first Nat Fuller feast over a charcoal fire, there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Hosted by one who had suffered so much, offered to those who had fled in his hour of need. Not only did Jesus feed his disciples that morning, he also established the foundational character for his church. We are his people, whose identity has been shaped by his lavish generosity. Because he leads us and feeds us, death cannot have the last word, and grace will triumph over every evil.