**Casting a Wide Net**

**Text: John 21:1-19**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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It must’ve been a while since they had last seen the Risen Lord. Long enough that they had begun to doubt that this Resurrection stuff was real. Why else would they go back to fishing? Jesus had called Peter and the other fisherman out of that vocation so that they could fish for people; so that they could spread the good news of God’s love and draw people into a new expression of faithful community. But with Jesus dead and the new movement stillborn, there was no alternative but to go back to their old job. That’s the way that Peter saw things anyway; or so the text seems to say.

But the Risen Lord had yet another surprise for his disciples. This time he appeared as a stranger on the beach. An old fisherman, perhaps; one who has some special insight into the art of fishing in this part of the Sea of Galilee; or, as it is called here, the Sea of Tiberias.

They don’t recognize him, of course. That’s a common feature of the resurrection appearances in both John and Luke. His followers just can’t predict when Jesus might appear, and through whom he might appear. But this time – the final resurrection appearance in John’s gospel – something seems to shift and the disciples finally get it. The new movement is well launched, with Peter at the helm, and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” placed in a unique position among Jesus’ followers as well.

That’s the way the story goes. But we need some background to make sure that we know what the story is saying. And we need to explore the subsequent ministry of the Beloved Disciple in order to see where the story is going. And we need to consider how the story impacts us and our ministry today. All of this comes under the overall heading of: you never know where the Risen Christ is going to show up, or through whom he’s going to be revealed.

So, first of all, some background. With the gospels in general, and with John in particular, we’re dealing with something other than a literal account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We’ve made this point before, but it bears repeating. The gospels aren’t history. They are proclamations of the good news of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. They use an historic framework to proclaim this good news. The good news was revealed in an historic figure named Jesus. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John didn’t approach their task with the kind of historical rigor that a modern historian would have. That approach to history was unknown in the 1st century. Their first priority was to tell a good story. Their first priority was to offer that good story to God as a means through which God could reveal his love for the whole world. Maybe some of the details of the story didn’t line-up exactly with the way that things actually happened. Maybe some of that was by mistake, and maybe some of that was by design. After all, I’ve never met a good story that didn’t become a better story by embellishment.

John especially is into embellishing the story so that a saga that is already maybe 75 years old by the time that he is writing can speak powerfully to his audience circa A.D. 100. And it’s okay for him to do this because he understands himself to be writing under the inspiration of the Risen Christ. He tells us himself that after Jesus died, the Christ returned to his followers as the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). So the Spirit of Truth – the Spirit of the Risen Christ – is guiding him to retell the story in such a way that it will speak to a Christian community that is very different from the community of Jesus’ followers who first heard the stories of Jesus in and around Jerusalem nearly three quarters of a century earlier. The story that is most important – to John and to us – is how the Risen Christ is at work today; not 75 years ago or 2,000 year ago, but today!

One indication that there’s no hard line in the gospel writers’ minds between the historic Jesus and the Risen Christ is the fact that the story told in John 21 about the Risen Lord is very similar to the story told in Luke 5 about the original call to these fisherman to be disciples. Both feature a story about fishing all night and catching nothing; and then Jesus tells them to cast their net again, at which point they catch so many fish that they have trouble hauling in the net. Both feature Peter in a state of humility and contrition. And both end with these fisherman-turned-disciples following Jesus. Luke places the story early in Jesus’ ministry, John places it post-Resurrection, but the key thing is the call to follow Jesus. The key thing is the Risen Lord saying to his disciples today, “Follow me!”

John even throws in an interesting literary twist to get our attention. He has Jesus cooking breakfast over a charcoal fire in the beach; just before he forgives and commissions Peter. This nicely balances the charcoal fire where Peter is warming himself when he denies Jesus on the night when the Lord was arrested. Only John has this detail. We’re drawn to the elegance of these parallel scenes, and that helps to engage us in the story; that helps us to get the message. Did it really happen that way? I don’t know; that’s not the point. The point is that we who have likewise denied Jesus are nevertheless forgiven and commissioned to follow him. With the literary device of the charcoal fire, John gets our attention so that we can get his point.

So, the gospels are compilations of stories, some more historic and some more literary in nature; stories that reveal to the Church the good news of God’s love for all. And because those stories were compiled decades after the Cross and the Empty Tomb, and tailored for a particular church with a particular culture and particular issues, the stories tells us at least as much about that church as they tell us about Jesus. Or, better yet, they tell us about the Risen Christ at work in and through that church.

Which brings us to the church that was founded by the Beloved Disciple; the church in which this story of the Risen Christ serving breakfast on the beach was crafted, or at least refined. That’s where this story is going: from the Risen Lord on that beach to the Risen Lord in that early Christian community. And as we read between the lines of John’s Gospel, we see that the community of the Beloved Disciples was a warm and inclusive bunch. It included Jewish Christians, Samaritan Christians, Gentile Christians, Christians influenced by Peter, Christians evangelized by the Beloved Disciple, and probably other varieties of early Christians mixed in for good measure. That’s what hauling in that heavy net full of fish is all about: the Beloved Disciple cast a wide net and welcomed all. In John’s gospel, when we see Jews or Samaritans or Greeks who are interested in Jesus, this is a hint that these groups are represented in the community for whom this gospel is written. And the number of disputes in John’s gospel suggests that there are fights within this community. Whenever you have a diverse community it is hard for everyone to get along. But they hang together. Like branches that stay connected to the vine in John 15:5, so this diverse community hangs together in Christ. They see the Risen Christ in each other. They hear the Risen Christ speaking through one another. And they recognize that other Christians, in very different communities, following different versions of the Gospel, are likewise follows of Jesus. These are the sheep in other folds referenced in John10:16. These other gospels are some of the other books that have been written to try to capture the multitude of amazing things that Jesus did. We read in John 3:16 that God so loved the *world* that God sent the only Son into the world, that *whosoever* believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life. Therein lies the directive of Jesus to the community of the Beloved Disciple, *and to us:* to welcome *all* who have come to ask questions about Jesus; to welcome *whoever* might believe in his name.

For John’s gospel, that’s a big part of what it means to follow Jesus: it means to welcome all. Because you never know where the Risen Lord will show up; and through whom he might appear.

Therein lies a story, about what all of this might have to do with us today:

When I was serving on Pastor Helen’s staff at First Christian-Bloomington, I worked quite a bit with our homeless neighbors: in the winter shelter, at the free Sunday breakfast, walking down the street: there were many opportunities to get to know these folks and hear their stories; opportunities to talk with them about Jesus and invite them to church.

This one fellow, whom I’ll call Eugene, he and I had spoken quite a bit, and one Sunday morning when the Invitation to Discipleship was offered, he came forward. He professed his faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and Lord and Savior of the world, we extended to him the right hand of Christian fellowship, and of course in a Disciples of Christ church, that’s all that’s required to become a member. So Eugene, to this day, is a member of First Christian-Bloomington, and he’s in church most Sundays, and sometimes he’s even sober.

One Saturday night it was cold and rainy and just a miserable night to be out. It was April, the winter shelter had closed for the season, but it was every bit as raw as a winter’s night. And Eugene was on the street. He’s homeless; he’s got nowhere to go. As he walked past the church, he saw that a door was ajar. Someone had left the church without making sure that the doors were shut and locked. Well, Eugene saw this as a sign from God! He went into the church, where it was warm and dry, and he spent that Saturday night sleeping in the Sanctuary. And when he woke-up, he went upstairs to the Great Hall for Sunday breakfast.

When Pastor Helen arrived, maybe an hour later, she found a pair of wet running shoes sitting in the chancel. She was a bit perplexed by this, and she started to ask some questions. Eventually she got the story from Eugene about how God had opened the door for him so that he could spend that rainy night in the church. At least, that’s the way that Eugene told the story.

Fast forward a few years. Pastor Helen is welcoming a visitor after worship one Sunday. And she asks the visitor, “How did you hear about First Christian Church?”

And the visitor responds, “One of your members invited me.”

Pastor Helen asks, “Who?”

And the visitor says, “Eugene. He told me what a warm church this is. He thinks you all are wonderful!”

We never know where the Risen Lord will show-up. You never know through whom the Risen Christ will appear. We never know exactly how the good news will be proclaimed. But we do know that to follow Jesus – to fish for people in Jesus’ name – is to cast a wide net indeed. It’s not up to us to determine which fish are fit to catch and which ones – if any – are not. That’s God’s job. All we know is that the Risen Christ is likely to show-up at any time, through any one, no matter how hard it might be for us to recognize that it’s the Lord. All we know is that the Risen Christ, like that stranger on the beach, offers hospitality; even to a bunch of sinners who have seemingly abandoned him. All we know is that he says to us, “Follow me.”