

May 5, 2019
The Third Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 9:1-20
Psalm 30
Revelation 5:11-14
John 21:1-19

In today's Gospel reading, we continued hearing the resurrection stories from John. Over the course of three weeks, and with only a couple of small jumps, our Sunday lectionary has taken us from Jesus' burial to the end of the Gospel. Each week we heard one large chunk, each in a different location. We began on Easter Sunday at the empty tomb; we continued last Sunday in the house with locked doors. Both tomb and house were in Jerusalem, where Jesus and the disciples, observant Jews that they were, had gone to observe the Passover.

This week, we find the disciples no longer in Jerusalem, but rather about 70 miles away, at the Sea of Tiberias, better known as the Sea of Galilee. They have returned home, to the place where they had seen better days: near the Sea of Galilee, Jesus had fed fish and bread to the five thousand; on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus had walked on water. Memories of those better days must have felt like waves sweeping the shoreline—sometimes soothing, sometimes distracting, sometimes distressing.

John doesn't say how long they've been there or what they've been doing. Instead, he gives us a list of disciples and Simon Peter's abrupt announcement, "I am going fishing." Of course the other disciples join him; Simon Peter is always a leader, if an impetuous one. As for fishing, it might simply be that they need food. But it feels like there's more going on. The risen Christ has come and gone; now what do they do? They have lost their compass; where do they go from here? Fishing could be another way they can at least *try* to return "home"—which is to say, back to the way things were before Jesus, back to the way things were before life became so unfamiliar and unpredictable. And so it is that at the Sea of Galilee the fishermen have become fishermen again.

Last week we heard about how the disciples *tried* to lock themselves away in that hiding house in Jerusalem. But Jesus flushed them out of there. Now they're trying to lock themselves away in a past that is familiar and routine. It's another way to hide, but in what may actually be the tougher project, Jesus is gonna flush them out of there, too. And he starts by helping them catch some fish.

This story is filled with details that are reminiscent of stories earlier in the gospel. Those disciples are drowning in memories, and when Jesus shows up, he only reinforces their remembering: the bounty of the catch recalls the outrageous amount of wine he made in Cana; the menu of bread and fish is the same he offered to that hungry five thousand. More complicated is that charcoal fire, which is not so different from the charcoal fire at which Peter uttered his three pre-dawn denials on Good Friday.

With fish, bread, and fire, Jesus works with concrete objects; he also ventures into the abstract with talk about sheep with Peter. Back in the day, Jesus had gone on and on about himself as the Good Shepherd and the living example of love. Now, at the fire on the beach, Jesus uses love and sheep to help those disciples make a shift: a shift from a here-and-now that looks *only* back, to a here-and-now that looks back *in order to* look forward. Looking in order to look forward: as I loved you, love.

Maybe Peter wants to stay home and resume his old life; that is not to be. His life will never be the same; he is facing a new normal. From now on, Peter's looking back *will be* in service to looking forward: as I loved you, love. By extension, for all the disciples, Jesus' message is the same: as I loved you, love.

After Jesus told those disciples to lower their nets one more time, they pulled up a great catch of fish. The number noted is a curiously specific one hundred fifty-three. Scholars say it's possible somebody counted those fish and that number got saved; more likely, the number is symbolic, because, as our math people would want to know, one hundred fifty-three equals the sum of all integers from one through seventeen. I like to imagine that the unspecific mystery number is a way to include each one of us, hauled up wet and wriggling from the water and thrown ashore, fishers of people caught by fishers of people, disciples for a new age that is always renewing. Jesus' message to us is the same as it was for those original disciples: As I loved you, love.

As I loved you: the only way to unpack that is to look back. That's really a big part of what we do here every Sunday. We do it through the readings; we do it through the Eucharist. It's not about glorifying the past or letting ourselves get stuck there; it's about remembering God's love, so that we can love.

During the season of Lent, the Christian theme often said to be repentance. During the season of Easter, the Christian theme is resurrection. I suspect that many of us actually find easier to do *repentance* than to do *resurrection*. In this, our memories play tricks on us, throwing a harsh light on own failures and deficiencies, while casting shadows on our successes and strengths. We live in a culture that is not going to help us with this. To offer one simple example, I'll note that our economy thrives on consumption driven by feelings of personal inadequacy. We are sold the tools with which we are bound. I think we can help one another get free, by helping one another to remember better and to direct the results beyond ourselves. One of the ways we do this is by daring to shout into the void the stories of our experiences of love.

In the church we talk about giving something up or taking something on for Lent; another word for this is Lenten *discipline*. I wonder: what would it look like to give something up or take something on for Easter? I wouldn't want to call this an Easter *discipline*; I think that rather more appropriate would be something the opposite of discipline. I casted about for a good word that means the opposite of discipline, but most have kind of negative connotations—words like chaos and disorder. But maybe that's okay: every spring is a bacchanalia of disorder; in the beginning, God birthed creation from chaos.

Maybe all this is just another way to talk about love. And so, this Easter season, I suggest we all try just a little *indiscipline*. I see just the boat for us. You can leave the old compass behind; it won't work where we're going. Into the waters of chaos, we will cast our nets in the usual way, but prepare for a big surprise. The catch will be as nothing you've experienced before. Look back only in order to steer forward. Remember God's love, and love.