

## "A Fishing Story"

John 21:1-14

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I am a fisherman. I love everything about fishing. I always have. Throughout my life, I've had the opportunity to try all kinds of fishing in all kinds of places. I've fished in a little pond with a line tied to the end of a bamboo pole. I've been deep sea fishing in the Caribbean and the Atlantic. I've been fly-fishing in rivers in Ohio, Quebec and Colorado. Oh the stories I could tell. We fishermen are full of stories. But, the fisherman's version of the serenity prayer that is on coffee cup I carry around here at church reminds me to be careful about my stories. The prayer goes like this: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the size of the fish I catch, the courage not to fib about it, and the wisdom to know that no one would believe me anyway."

We fishermen have a bad reputation for truth-telling.

One fisherman I heard about got tired of people doubting his truthfulness. He bought a scale and took it with him to his favorite fishing hole. He insisted on weighing every fish he caught, just to prove that he didn't exaggerate. Months later his wife had a baby. The doctor borrowed the man's fishing scale to weigh the baby. The doctor gasped, "I've never seen a newborn baby that weighed fifty pounds!"

Someone said that the difference between a hunter and a fisherman is that the hunter lies and waits and the fisherman waits and lies. Someone else asked, "What happens to lying fishermen when they die?" The answer, "They lie still."

The disciple Thomas gets a bad rap for demanding proof of the resurrection. He just wouldn't take Peter's word for it. Maybe it was because he remembered that Peter and some of the other disciples were fishermen, so he knew better than to take them at their word. Maybe that's why he felt the need for proof.

So, is the resurrection simply another fishing story? Let's take a look at the story to find out.

It was at least a couple of weeks after that first Easter morning. The disciples had left Jerusalem, and seven of them were together at the Sea of Galilee. They had seen Jesus twice already after his resurrection, but the story gives the sense that they really weren't doing anything in ministry as a result of their witness to Jesus' resurrection.

I almost get the sense that they didn't really know what to do. After all, what do you do when the three-year whirlwind journey with Jesus is over? What do you do when Jesus isn't around any longer to guide and direct you?

They went back to the area of their homes, and Peter went back to what he knew. He went fishing. There is no real sense that he was going back to work as a fisherman, it seems to me

that he simply is looking for something to do, so he decides to go fishing. The other disciples say, "We'll join you." They apparently didn't have anything else better to do either.

They failed miserably in their fishing efforts. The whole night passed and they didn't catch a thing. Any fisherman knows that the only thing worse than not catching anything is not going fishing at all! But they got skunked in their fishing trip. I've tried to imagine what it must have been like to have been on that fishing trip with them. What excuses would they have used to explain their failure? Is it possible that they forgot how to fish? Were they in unfamiliar waters, so they didn't know where the hot spots were? Were their hearts just not into it?

Whatever the reasons, when morning came, they hadn't caught a thing. Then this man on the shoreline calls out to them to ask if they had caught anything. It's a common question for fishermen. "Got anything?" "Nope." "Try casting your net on the other side. You'll get some there."

Now, if they hadn't caught anything all night, I can't imagine that they hadn't tried throwing their net off of both sides of the boat. But what the heck? If someone has a fishing tip for you, why not give it a shot? Especially after you've been unsuccessful all night long.

They cast their net over the right side of the boat. As they pull back on the net, they get that rush of adrenaline that all fishermen long for. They feel something pulling back on the line. They've got something, and it's big. They had so many fish that, even with seven men on the boat, they couldn't pull the catch out of the water and onto the boat. It was a miracle!

And maybe that's what got John thinking, because he took another look at that man on the shoreline. Could it be? It was! "Peter, it's the Lord. That guy on the shoreline is Jesus!"

And here is where the story gets a little weird to those of us reading it in today's world. As the story goes, when Peter realized it was Jesus, he threw on a robe because he was naked and he jumped out of the boat.

Now why would Peter fish naked, and why would he put a robe on before he jumped out of the boat?

When you think about it, it kind of makes sense that Peter would fish without any clothes on. When you fish, you get wet, you get fish gunk on you, it's a messy job. If you don't have a bunch of extra clothes or the ability to throw your clothes in a washing machine when you're done, you probably want to keep the clothes you have as clean as possible, so it seems natural that Peter would take his clothes off when fishing. And then, of course, he wouldn't greet Jesus without any clothes on. So Peter throws on his robe and jumps out of the boat to get to Jesus.

Peter abandons fishing once again because of Jesus. He abandons those he's with once again because of Jesus. Peter leaves the six other guys to haul the boat in, dragging the fish through the water in the net behind them. Jesus has a fire going with some fish roasting on it and also

some bread. He asks the disciples to bring some of the fish they caught. Peter goes back to the boat to bring the fish to Jesus when he realizes that there were 153 fish in the net and the net wasn't even broken.

Jesus shares a breakfast of bread and fish with the disciples, strikingly reminiscent of the feeding of the 5000 with the five loaves and two fishes. The Gospel tells us that the disciples choose not to even ask if it really was Jesus, because they knew it was him.

So here we have a fairly standard sounding fish story. "We hadn't caught a thing all night long, then Jesus comes and tells us to drop our net to the other side and we catch 153 fish! There were so many that we couldn't even land them all on the boat. But when we got them all ashore, the net wasn't even broken!"

A lot of folks have tried to figure out the significance of the number 153. I have to admit it's the one detail in the story that stands out as particularly specific. Some have suggested that providing such a specific number was simply a way to make people understand that it wasn't a tall tale fishing story, because only an eyewitness would be able to name the specific number of fish caught.

Other explanations feel a little more like something you might read in *The Davinci Code* or another Dan Brown novel about symbology. Apparently Greek and Hebrew letters had numerical values, so some think that the number 153 represents a word. Which word? Well, there are any number of words that could total 153, so your guess is as good as mine.

In the fifth century, Cyril of Alexandria said that the number 153 is made up of three things. First, there is 100; and that represents 'the fullness of the Gentiles'. 100, he says, is the fullest number. The shepherd's full flock is 100 (Matthew 18:12). The seed's full fertility is a hundredfold. So the 100 stands for the fullness of the Gentiles who will be gathered to Christ. Second, there is the 50; and the 50 stands for the remnant of Israel who will be gathered in. Third, there is the 3; and the 3 stands for the Trinity to whose glory all things are done.<sup>1</sup> This explanation doesn't really make much sense to me. It seems like kind of a stretch.

Then there's the explanation given by Saint Augustine. He noted that 10 is the number of the law, for there are ten commandments; 7 is the number of grace, since seven gifts of the Spirit are named. Now  $7 + 10$  makes 17; and 153 is the sum of all the numbers from one to seventeen. When you add  $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 \dots$  all the way up to 17, you get 153. Therefore, Augustine said that 153 stands for all those who either by law or by grace have been moved to come to Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> This one still seems like kind of a stretch to me.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume Two" (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 330.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 331.

Finally, there is the explanation given by the fourth-century biblical scholar Jerome. He said that in the sea there are 153 different kinds of fishes; and that the catch is one which includes every kind of fish; and that therefore the number symbolizes the fact that some day all people of all nations will be gathered together to Jesus Christ. If you note that the net gathered all the fishes and was not broken, you may conclude that the net symbolizes the church, and that there is room in the church for all people of all nations. Even if they all come in, the church is big enough to hold them all.<sup>3</sup> This is the explanation that seems to make the most sense to me.

So what does this fishing story have to tell us about living as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today? What is our call to discipleship from this week's text?

I think we all have times in our lives that feel like the disciples unproductive fishing trip. You know, those times when we go about the business of our lives, but we feel like we've got nothing to show for our efforts. The disciples had fished all night long without catching a thing. What is it in your life that feels this way? In what way do you feel like the disciples, working all night long with nothing to show for it? Maybe it's related to your work or to a relationship that you have. Maybe it's just a general sense of being unfulfilled.

In the story, Jesus tells the disciples to try something different. It wasn't a radical change from what they were doing. He didn't tell them to abandon their way of fishing and try something completely different. Jesus simply redirected their efforts and told them to cast their nets in a different place.

So what word is Jesus trying to speak to you from the shoreline of your life? What change might you make, either in the direction of your efforts or maybe in your perspective about your efforts? If Jesus spoke a word to you about your situation, what would he say, and what difference would it make?

Like the disciples, we can leave our experience of Jesus and go about the business of our lives. We can leave Jesus here at church on Sunday and go back to our day-to-day lives at work or home throughout the week, and we can try to do things on our own without any direction from Jesus. All too often, this ends up unfruitful or at least unfulfilling.

Our other option is to pay attention to the voice of Jesus in our lives and allow Jesus to direct what we do. And maybe we'll end up with such abundance from our efforts that we won't quite know what to do with it. Maybe our efforts will end up impacting not just ourselves, but, like the 153 fish represented, maybe our efforts will have an impact on the entire world. This is the hope, and this is the promise of living our lives in line with Jesus' direction as we, together, build the Kingdom of God here on Earth. And so, let us do just that. Let us listen for the voice of Jesus in our lives, and let us allow Jesus to direct our actions so we can participate with Jesus in co-creating the Kingdom of God here on Earth. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 331.