

April 25, 2004
Third Sunday of Easter
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Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time
(with apologies to Marcus Borg, whose book bears this title)

John 21:1-19 *After this he said to him, "Follow me."*

The last chapter of John's gospel has this rich story of the resurrected Jesus encountering the disciples and calling them once again into discipleship. Throughout the story, we have the feeling that we've been here before, that we've gone back to the beginning—to the seashore, to the fishing, to the call of Jesus to follow him. This story is precisely for those who were not witnesses to the resurrection, a mystery that is locked away from us. We hear the proclamation of Christ's resurrection and are called into the great adventure of following the living Christ. At times we will know his presence; at other times we will not. At times we will have confidence; at times we will feel lost and wonder what the next step is. Sometimes we will have great enthusiasm, but then we will be challenged to translate enthusiasm into commitment, a life of spiritual practice, growth, and mission. All of this is in this story. Let's look at it.

The first scene finds the disciples just kind of hanging out, at loose ends, not knowing what to do next. They've just experienced the resurrection of Jesus. But already the experience has begun to fade. The disciples are back in the everyday world. The glow of the past always dims because we must live in the present and always search out anew how to do that.

Peter, probably with a heavy sigh, says he's going fishing. Back to what he was doing before he met Jesus. Back to the everyday, to what he knows. When you're feeling uneasy and lost, it helps somehow to do something you know, something familiar, something normal and mundane. The others shrug and say, "Why not. We'll go along."

So they're out there on the lake doing some night fishing. Along comes Jesus, but they don't recognize him. Notice how all the gospel writers keep the shroud of mystery over the resurrection and the risen Christ? There's no attempt to prove it or to dazzle us. People see Jesus, but they don't know it's him. This fits our experience. Sometimes we "see" Jesus, sometimes we don't. Sometimes we know his presence clear and powerful; sometimes we don't experience a thing. Jesus calls to the disciples--Are you catching anything? How's the luck? Nothing. Not a thing. We've been at this all night with nothing to show. Often we work so hard at the life of faith, at our own particular calling, and there are little or no results.

Well, says Jesus, try the other side of the boat. Who is this guy? What a stupid suggestion—the other side of the boat! It's the same water! Same spot! But they do what he says. This is a central meaning of faith in the scriptures—just doing what Jesus says, just trusting his word, just putting out the net one more time, even when it seems purposeless and you're dog-tired. That's a meaning of faith we can connect with. It has no glory and glamour about it. Faith is just trying one more time, when your efforts so far haven't yielded any results. It's just listening to this stranger standing on the shore in the darkness of night telling you to cast out in a different place, just one more time.

The disciples start hauling in more fish than they can handle. John calls out that it is Jesus. Peter, impulsive and passionate, jumps in the water to get ahead of everyone else, leaving the others to take care of business.

Two weeks ago we were to have our first meeting with parents and children for the Saturday morning program we are trying to start at the Festival Center. We had printed fliers and brochures, walked the neighborhood, talked to children and parents, spread the word pretty well, we thought. The program was prepared, delicious refreshments brought, and we gathered on Saturday morning to wait for the children to come trooping through the door. Nobody came. All our efforts. All our great dreams. All our work. Nothing. I don't know about the others, but

I was fighting feelings of deep discouragement. But we sat down and had a meeting. We looked at other ways to move ahead, particular people we would visit with and talk to, a new approach. Cast your net on the other side! But we're tired, disappointed, discouraged! Yes, I know, but do it anyway. So we did.

We've spent the last two weeks making visits, new posters, talking to people, going deeper into the community. Will the children and parents come this Saturday? We don't know. But we've already hauled in a good catch of new relationships with persons and organizations and those who are affirming of what we're trying to do and are willing to help. Other needs of the community are surfacing that can be met by the space we felt God calling us to make available for the neighborhood. Being faithful to God's call is not easy. It is very exciting when the vision comes, when others gather to share it. Hopes are high. But there is always that time, and many times along the way, when we go flat, when hope sags and excitement isn't enough. Where do you go? You go fishing. You go back to where it all began—in the world, the everyday, to your life. And you keep at it, listening for that voice that will say at some point, "Put your net on the other side."

It is in the everyday work of being Christ's community, the often mundane tasks of those things we feel called to, the sometimes discouraging work of our inward spiritual lives and the outward missions to which we've given ourselves...it is in all of that where the risen Christ meets us. And if we remain open, do not let ourselves collapse into despair or fall into anger and blaming that things aren't more exciting or fruitful than they are, we will hear a voice saying, "Throw your nets over there. Just once more. Try in a different place."

The second scene finds Jesus on the beach, fixing breakfast for his disciples. This is so familiar! Meal times were important for Jesus. Meals with his disciples. Meals in the homes of friends and even hated tax collectors. Meals with the rich. Meals with the poor. And the one special meal, the Passover Seder that he shared with his disciples. He made that meal into something the disciples could share after he was physically gone from him. When they would share the bread and cup, they would remember him. And memory in the Hebrew mind and experience was not just thinking about some past event or person. It was experiencing a presence. It was being connected with God, with Jesus, with one another in the present moment.

The first scene speaks of our struggles to be faithful, the times of discouragement and feeling lost, and the importance of keeping at it until we are met once again by the living Christ. This second scene is about Jesus' presence as the one who prepares a meal for us. It is about the living Christ who continues to nourish us as we worship together, especially as we share the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. It took me some years to fully appreciate my Disciples of Christ heritage and the sharing of the Lord's Supper every time we worship. The Disciples entered into official ecumenical dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church in 1975. What did that huge, worldwide church have in common with a tiny indigenous American protestant denomination? We realized that we were both Eucharistic communities. That is, our lives centered in the presence of Christ in the bread and cup, celebrated every time the community worships. Frequent sharing of the Lord's Supper is the recognition that Christ is present with us and to us in the Lord's Supper in a fuller way than any other part of the worship service and that it is that mysterious reality of communing with the living Christ in the Eucharist that we become again who we are and are called to be as Christ's community.

This scene says to us that worship is not less important than action in the world; it is the wellspring. Worship is the fountain of right living for the sake of God's kingdom. Faithful worship with the community of faith and the sharing of the Eucharist is one of the disciplines of Covenant Members in this community and should be for all of us who want to take seriously the life of faith. In worship we meet the God who, as Psalm 23 says, prepares a table for us in the presence of threat and struggle and difficulty. Worship is our taking refuge in God and in the presence of the living Christ, so that we remember who we really are, so that we are healed, refreshed, and restored in order to be a new people, a community of love and mission.

But again, notice the story. The disciples are still not sure. They know it is Jesus; but they don't want to say anything. This is such a beautiful way John has of speaking about the mystery of Christ's presence with us. It is not something that always bowls us over. It is the presence of the living Christ and the new life God has given us in him. And that presence, that life is always mystery and gift, to be received and experienced with open minds and hearts. Worship is not "having an experience." It is not about conjuring up religious feelings. It is about being together in the presence of the living Christ, who is known and not known, just as God is known and not known. Our worship celebrates this deep mystery and grace of life that we cannot own or hold onto or reduce to something we control. And yet it is this celebration that somehow awakens us to God, to one another, to our true selves. It is this discipline of worship and the sharing of the Eucharist that shapes who we are.

In the last scene, Jesus says, "Peter, let's take a walk down the beach." As they walk, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" Three times he asks, and Peter gets embarrassed, flustered, and his feelings hurt that Jesus doesn't seem to believe him. "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." This story is often seen as a kind reinstatement of Peter after his three-fold denial of Jesus the night of Jesus' arrest. But I don't think that's the only meaning. Why does Jesus first ask, "Do you love me more than these?" Is Jesus encouraging a kind of hierarchy among the disciples—I love Jesus more than you do?

Jesus knows Peter's passion and strong will. Peter was always rushing to the front of the line, always wanting to be something special and prove himself. Remember that it was Peter who jumped out of the boat so he could get to Jesus first. I wonder if Jesus' question isn't something like this: "Peter, do you really love me more than the others, the way you are always trying to prove?" "If you really love me so much, if you are really so passionate about all of this, then there is something you must do. Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs." Being passionate isn't enough. Being filled with zealous faith isn't enough. Religious emotions are not enough. If we love Jesus, we translate that love into caring for those for whom Jesus cared, beginning with each other. Love for Christ is expressed in commitment to the community, with all its flaws and irritations and conflicts and disappointments. It is loving people in the real and concrete, not in the ideal and abstract.

I continue to be amazed at how difficult this is for most people. We want an ideal community. We want the church to be what we want it to be. We come with our demands and expectations, and when those aren't met, we search on down the line. We want to love, but not go through the struggle to love. However, it is only in tending Christ's sheep, in being part of the community he calls together that we encounter the living Christ, precisely in that struggle to love and to care, not in the ideal but the real.

But I don't think Jesus' sheep are just us, just the church, just Christians. To love Christ is to love all people—the enemy, the foreigner, the outcast and the outlaw, the rich and power and the poor and oppressed. Jesus made no distinction. His love was a transforming power that lifted up those who were brought low and brought low those who were lofty and powerful. But it was all the same love, working in different ways for God's kingdom. Jesus' sheep are all of those who come into our circle of life, whom God gives to us to care for with our listening, our presence, our friendship.

I think Jesus' sheep he calls us to care for includes the earth itself. We are not just part of one another; we are part of the earth, the very universe. We are completely dependent upon everything around us and everything around us is a part of us. This is not mystical mumbo-jumbo. It is the deepest wisdom of ancient religions including our own. It is also the unfolding truth that science is running into again and again. If we do not take care of people and the earth, we are endangering everything and everyone, including ourselves. The only reason Jesus didn't make care of the earth front and center of his teachings is that in his day the kind of environmental disaster we have created was unimaginable. Yet his teachings were laced with the creation and our need to rejoice in and learn from it. He knew God as Creator and sustainer of

the Creation. And he knew the psalms and their deep perceptions about all nature singing praises to God.

If you love me, care for my sheep. Love is not feelings, but commitment. Love for Jesus is expressed in ministry, in caring for and tending life around us. Loving Christ is not a matter of the heart alone but the whole life, and finding what it is that Christ gives each of us to do for the sake of the world.

This story ends where the whole story began. Jesus' last words to Peter are: "Follow me." These words echo through the gospels, through the ages, and are sounded today, in this moment, in our lives. Follow me. And so we meet Jesus again for the first time.