

Casting anew

Menno Mennonite Church

April 7, 2024

Purpose: To hear again the call of our brothers and sisters to hear the moving of the spirit.

Message: As people of resurrection, we are invited to cast out our nets in renewed faithfulness, acting to the foundation of the kingdom.

Scripture: Psalm 133, John 21:1-12

Synopsis: As we meet the risen Lord, we are invited to the newness of what is next. Time and again, the nature of faith is coming together to do what is new, even when it is the familiar. Here, the disciples are doing what is familiar to them—they go fishing. Yet here again, Jesus meets them in the normal and calls them again to what is new. How might we be invited into what is next for our ordinary now made holy.

John 21:1-12

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After these things
Jesus showed himself
again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias;
and he showed himself in this way.

² Gathered there together were Simon Peter,
Thomas called the Twin,
Nathanael of Cana in Galilee,
the sons of Zebedee,
and two others of his disciples.

³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing."
They said to him, "We will go with you."

They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach;
but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?"

They answered him, "No."

⁶ He said to them,
"Cast the net to 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 there were so many fish.

⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord,
he put on some clothes, for he was naked,
and jumped into the sea.

⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat,
dragging the net full of fish,
for they were not far from the land,
only about a hundred yards¹ off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore,
they saw a charcoal fire there,
with fish on it, and bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."

¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore,
full of large fish,
a hundred fifty-three of them;
and though there were so many,
the net was not torn.

¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."

Now none of the disciples dared to ask him,
"Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord.

Sometimes, simplest is the best. Not that you would know that always by our behavior or the way we sometimes arrange the world. There, we often prefer something far more convoluted and complicated than what is really in our best interest. I know that when I am confronted with a troubleshooting problem, I am given to the more elaborate (and there by far more attractive solution) than I am the more obvious elements further down on the tree. My imagination makes an engine issue a bad sensor or some element of the electromechanical sensor system to explain something rather far sooner than the more logical and likely blown fuse. Frequently I need to remind myself of the troubleshooting tree—does it have power, is it turned on, does it need to be restarted—starting at the root and working my way up lest I get caught by thinking the more complicated thoughts first. In our house we have a shorthand to remind ourselves to start simple: we just shout “Zebra!”. The point of this is to offer a warning to look out for zebras and, by extension to invoke the old saying “when you hear hoof beats, do not first think of zebras”, meaning look for the ordinary even when you want the extraordinary.

There is something in the basic human psyche that gravitates to the extraordinary, especially for the things we struggle to understand. There is a reason that there is a significant segment of opinion that would hold that the pyramids were put together by extraterrestrial technology: it is a more satisfying response than trying to wrap your head around thousands of hours of back breaking toil by humans on a scale that we can barely imagine. Even today we don't have a certain explanation for how, just that it did actually happen. Many times we look for satisfaction far more than we look for sense.

Were we writing the script, the resurrected Christ would have a far bigger agenda than what he seems to have. The interactions, though numerous, are not always what we might be given to expect. The Gospels seems to be a bit split by it all. The synoptic gospels-Matthew, Mark and Luke—are almost striking in their post-resurrection conversation. Matthew follows up with the great commission, Luke has 4 verses (Emmaus being on Easter proper) and then the ascension, and Mark barely has time to wrap it all together to say he has risen. John is where we turn for this, recalling the confirmation of Jesus' physicality with Thomas, then this coming to comfort and commission the disciples. That's it. There is so much a dearth of stories and sightings here that skeptics of the resurrection call the gospels to be on their side.

One of the ways to appreciate the work of the biblical stories is to allow ourselves to notice the oddities as information around which to engage the text as much as that which we would expect. These text, despite their familiarity and easy comfort are a bit odd. Odd in the way that things do not go in the way that we would expect. We might be given to wonder where the action here is. If the script were left to us, we would likely include a good deal more action. Like appearing in Rome or Jerusalem and lecturing those who though their power had won the day about how they were wrong. Or perhaps we might have him continuing his career—preaching, teaching and healing, releasing some prisoners and making some crooked ways straight. Even the abundant catch of fish is not much compared to what had been. In life he feeds 5000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Here he catches 153 fish to feed 7. The ratios are a bit off. There are no sermons, no nothing; just the simplest of all things: “Catch anything?”, “Cast your nets on the left side”, “Come, Have breakfast.”

With all of this departure from the world as we would know it there is little wonder that there are any number of efforts to make this time on the beach ring with cosmic importance of the most high seeking to match the tone of what came before. If you dig into this text, you will see all the props of the story given special meaning—the boat, the net, the clothes put on. Among the more notable was the efforts of the church father Augustine of Hippo who offers us some symbolic math by way of giving this the proper complication to fit our expectations. He starts with the 10 commandments and the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit which give you 17. If you then add all the integers of 1 to 17 together ($1 + 2 + 3$ and so on) what do you get: 153 making the catch from the sea the perfect melding of the law and gospels. Offering this connection allows us the deeper insight that we might be looking for when we seek the zebra among the horses.

But I think that is precisely missing the point. Attempt to complicate the story and give it the “easter” treatment to make it shiny and important deny us from knowing it more easily. It denies the opportunity for Jesus to appear in ordinary circumstances of the disciples just getting on with their lives more ordinary only to be called in, comforted and commissioned, again, to go out and build the kingdom. As much as we are enthralled and wowed with the stained glass window version of the resurrection, at the end of the day what we need far more is the resurrected Christ who knows to find us where we are and how we are with what we most need: food for the journey, and invitation to follow, and forgiveness when we fail. As critically important and central as the words and deeds of the passion are, giving us meaning and hope

with the ways of the kingdom, what makes the resurrection work best are the words and working of the resurrected one in presence and in Spirit coming and being found in the midst of the ordinary in the world, “amid the pots and pans” as Teresa of Avila puts it. We need a Jesus that rises from the dead in glory, sure. But even more so we need a resurrected reality to come to the office, the fields, the store, the highways, the social media and the millions of other ordinary places of human life and living made holy by the promise that the kingdom has come once and for all.

Most of the time it is we who put up the velvet ropes around the places of the Spirit, cordoning them off to be venerated and preserved as the special places they are. But time and again YHWH God comes where humanity is least expecting and almost never through the mechanisms that we setup to administer such presence. Jacob is in a bad place and needs a place to rest, and finds only a stone for a pillow only to wake and find that he has slept in the very house of God—the Beth-El. Moses is simply tending sheep on a mountainside when he finds himself confronted by holy ground and the call to the great “I am”. The spies dispatched by Joshua to scout out Jericho duck into a brothel and though they didn’t exactly go there looking for God, they end up hearing an inspired sermon delivered to them by no less likely a candidate to preach a sermon than the establishment’s chief madam, Rahab. The prophet Elijah was on the run from those he was sure would spell his doom. He ran and hid from it all, only to have YHWH find him there and give him what he needed to do what was next. The travelers on that first Easter Sunday left Jerusalem quite literally “to get away from it all” and to escape the sadness they had come to associate with the big city. They end up at Emmaus only to discover Jesus after all.

And here too the disciples go and do what they understood because having seen Christ, having received the women’s Good News on Easter morning however incomprehensibly, having been confronted with the risen Christ and the Spirit breathed upon them to carry them from fear into following; having been given the opportunity to touch, feel, wonder, doubt, only to have their best dreams confirmed, they go on to what is next. They go back to fishing. Having spotted Jesus twice already they seem to be at loose ends. They go and do what they do, and fail miserably at it. But it is there they find Jesus. On a Beach. By a Fire. Ready to grant abundance. Ready to be encountered. Ready to send the disciples to be the apostles that would, fully, tell the story and spread the word.

God has a way of showing up in the places that we are least expecting. It happens all over the place in the Bible. Somehow we have stopped expecting it here and now. We have discontinued the practice of wondering at the possibility, leaning on our rational selves and our expectations that would tell us that God can only exist in hazy light from above and a voice like Charlton Heston. We have set ourselves the expectation that this is how things *Must* be when God is involved. We setup the story that demands that God must be met in the right way, in the right place, at the right time. We insist on zebras even when God comes to us time and again in the ordinary, asking us to but come, sit, and know the risen one in love.

My challenge for you this week is simple. No matter where you find yourself, no matter how you encounter a world in transition, or even if it is a week of the same old same old that have become so familiar as to be without thought and feeling, open your self up. Expect to encounter the holy. Look for it. Reach for it. Embrace it. This is not how we typically think, this is not how we typically act, especially when we are moving from one place to another. Yet it is an important change of mindset. When you are looking for the in breaking of God, you will think of things differently. You will see things differently, you will find things take on a different shape than what they might otherwise. A kind word might be more than just nicety, it is the welcome of the Lord. An opportunity to show love is not simply another request in a demanding schedule, but a call to cast your net on the other side. God comes to us and invites us to be fed, invites us to be loved, invites us to be blessed, and we are called to simply recognize when that happens. Look for it; you might be surprised who you meet calling to you to come and be fed, and the encounters this might lead to.

May we find the resurrected one right where we would always look—beside us and with us, always. Amen.