

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
April 14, 2013  
Third Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 9:1-19  
Psalm 33:1-11  
Revelation 5:6-14  
John 21:1-14

We come today to another appearance of Jesus to his disciples after his resurrection. John tells us that the disciples are on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and Peter says, “I’m going fishing.”

In some ways, I suppose, this is perfectly understandable. Peter, and the others, failed Jesus miserably. And what do you do in the face of great failure? Well, one option is to go back to what you were doing before you “took a leap” and tried something new and different. Back to the drawing board, or in Peter’s case, the fishing hole. Back to what is familiar to you. Back to what you do well.

When you’ve failed someone the way the disciples have failed Jesus, the last person you want or expect to see is the one you have failed. Peter and the others return to what they know, and it is not likely that they are looking for Jesus. But Jesus is most definitely looking for *them*.

He shows up on the shore at daybreak and calls out, “friends, having any luck?”

Not recognizing Jesus, they respond, “nope.”

“Why don’t you try throwing your net over the right side of the boat?” says the stranger. “You’ll find plenty of fish there.”

I’m just guessing, but I’m thinking that if these guys have been fishing all night, chances are that at some point in the night they *have had their nets on the right side of the boat*. You’ve got the right side, the left side – what other options do you have?

It’s tough to take advice – even well meant advice – that seems simplistic or obvious, especially when you are experienced and well-schooled in what you are doing. And it can be especially tough to take to heart advice that comes to us from a stranger, someone who may not have credibility with us.

But for whatever reason, the disciples decide to heed this advice, and they cast their net over the right side of the boat. They find the net so full of fish that they can’t even draw it in.

At that point John says to Peter, “the guy on the shore is the Lord!”

Peter dives into the water and immediately heads for the shore. When the others catch up and arrive, they find that there is a charcoal fire burning with fish frying over it, and some bread.

Jesus says, “bring along some of the fish you caught, and come have some breakfast.”

Now, the last time these guys were gathered around a charcoal fire, they were in a courtyard. And the guy that just jumped out of the boat and beat everyone to shore had his worst moment as he denied Jesus three times. But here, around this charcoal fire, Jesus invites them to share what they have, and he serves them breakfast. It's reminiscent of a Eucharistic sharing.

And although it's not in our text, do you know what comes next? It's the well-known exchange between Jesus and Peter where Jesus asks Peter three times: "Do you love me?"

When Peter answers that he does, Jesus says to him: "Feed my sheep."

So, let me see if I have this straight. The last time Peter stood around a charcoal fire, he denied his Lord three times. In the aftermath, his Lord has sought him out as he is fishing. Gathered again around a charcoal fire, he asks three times for Peter's love, and as Peter gives it to him it's as if symbolically his three-fold denial is being wiped away.

But Peter is not merely forgiven. Jesus tells him: "Feed my sheep." Peter is not merely forgiven, he is also drawn back into the community of disciples, and he is given meaningful work to do.

It is very easy for us to identify with these disciples, especially Peter. Our thoughts and feelings may be summed up in the words of the gospel song that reads:

*I've heard his love is patient, that he always hears a prayer,  
And that his love will follow you, despite the miles --  
But my best years of life I wasted, why would he even really care?  
What have I to give that he would find worthwhile?  
Tell me -- I just want to know --  
Tell me how far will he go? Will he still reach to me in spite of where  
I've been?* [Phillips, Craig, and Dean, *He'll Do Whatever It Takes*, from the album *Favorite Songs of All*]

The answer to that question that sometimes haunts us is an emphatic “yes.”

The song goes on to say:

*He'll do whatever, whatever it takes,  
His grace reaches lower than your worst mistake;  
And his love will run farther than you can run away, my friend;  
He'll do whatever it takes.*

May I ask you a question this morning? Do you truly believe this? After every failure in your life, pay attention. For Jesus will show up. *Jesus will find you and he will forgive you.*

Failure is always an *event*, never a *person*. Your failures are never final, at least not in Jesus' mind. Jesus seeks you out, because he will not allow your failure to be the last word.

You may be here this morning and feel that you have fallen short. Jesus knows your heart. He understands. He stands ready to forgive you. But he doesn't stop there. He calls on you to try again. And he doesn't merely just call on you to try again. He asks you to bring what you have, to share what you have, because he has meaningful work for you to do.

Think about this for a moment. At our baptisms, we were commissioned to share in the ministry and work of Jesus. But like Peter and the others, we sometimes come up short. We fail in word and deed to bear witness to the Kingdom.

But Jesus never gives up on us. Instead, he calls us to come together like this. And after a week where we may have fallen short, he invites us to try again. He summons us to eat together. He encourages us and feeds us. Then he calls on us to add what we have to what he provides, and to depart worship to do the meaningful work he gives us in the world.

As you come to the table this morning, don't just bring what you feel are the good things about your life to Christ. Bring your failures also. Bring the pain and discouragement that comes from falling short. Bring the confusion that often comes when you don't fully understand how God is working in your life and in the world.

In the midst of failure, remember that Jesus is looking for you. He is determined that your failure not be final. He wants you to try again. He has meaningful work for you to do. So come, take your place alongside me and your fellow failures. Let's add our small part to what Jesus provides us. And let's feed his sheep.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.