

‘GONE FISHING’

John 21:1-14

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples over a period of forty days. And during that time, according to Acts 1:3, He showed Himself alive by many **“convincing proofs.”** The Greek word translated as “convincing proofs” has the sense of “unmistakable evidence.” Jesus gave His disciples unmistakable evidence that He was indeed alive.

As the risen Jesus appeared to His disciples and taught them about the kingdom of God, they increasingly understood the implications of the resurrection. The living Savior meant living hope. The resurrection meant that Jesus Christ was exactly who He claimed to be; namely, **“the Son of God with power.”** The resurrection meant that death was a defeated enemy; that God the Father had fully accepted the sacrifice for sins of God the Son; and that nothing done in the name and power of the risen Lord would ever be done in vain.

And so Paul wrote at the conclusion of 1 Corinthians 15, that majestic chapter on the resurrection of Christ and its realities for our lives and deaths: **“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain”** (1 Corinthians 15:58). Why is nothing done in the Lord in vain? Because the Lord Jesus is alive.

The question may be rightly asked: Why did Jesus appear to His disciples over a period of forty days, when one day, the first Easter Day, was proof enough of His resurrection? But such is our living, eternally loving Lord. Jesus wanted His disciples to be absolutely certain of His resurrection. He wanted to teach them and enable them to understand that His death and resurrection were the fulfillment of the Scriptures; as we read in Luke 24, **“Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem,’”** Luke 24:45-47.

On Easter Day, Jesus gave His disciples unmistakable evidence that He was alive. And during the thirty-nine days that followed, Jesus showed His disciples what His resurrection meant for their lives—for all aspects of their lives from preparing for death to preparing for ministry to preparing breakfast by the Sea of Galilee, which is what happened in today’s text. Breakfast by the Sea with the risen Jesus. Sounds lovely,

doesn't it?

Scripture does not record all the resurrection appearances of Jesus from Easter Day to Ascension Day. It does record that He appeared to Mary Magdalene; to the women who hastened to the tomb; to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus; to ten disciples in the locked room, minus Thomas; and a week later, to eleven disciples including Thomas; and according to 1 Corinthians 15:6, to more than five hundred believers at one time. When Paul wrote First Corinthians in 51 or 52 A.D., many of those witnesses were still alive.

Yet, regardless of the number of resurrection appearances, do not view any of these appearances as unplanned or coincidental or haphazard. They were not. Jesus chose the various times and places to show Himself alive and present and always involved in the lives and labors of His disciples. And each appearance had a specific lesson and a specific application.

Such is the case with today's text, John 21:1-14, in which Jesus appeared to seven of His disciples—Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two others not named—as they were fishing on the Sea of Tiberias, another name for the Sea of Galilee. I said, “as they were fishing.” In that simple, every day, familiar setting of GONE FISHING the risen Jesus appeared to His disciples.

In fact, the familiar setting of today's text is really its **first important lesson; namely, the risen Jesus is always with us wherever we go and whatever we do.** We're not told why the disciples went fishing that day. Perhaps they were bored. Perhaps they needed fresh air. Perhaps they were hungry. Perhaps they wanted to keep themselves occupied while waiting for Jesus to appear again. Peter said, “**I am going fishing,**” verse 3. The other disciples replied, “**We are going with you also.**” So off they went, perhaps never imagining that the risen Lord would appear to them as they did something as simple and commonplace as fishing. Certainly the Savior had better things to do, better places to be.

Don't you and I often think the same way? Yes, we joyfully celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Day. “Jesus Christ is risen today, hallelujah.” But what about the day after Easter and the day after that? In similar fashion we too often restrict the meaning and power of Christ's resurrection to the hereafter, when its meaning and power are also intended for the here-and-now. Isn't that why Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10, “**I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection?**”

All of us in this church building are Christians. All of us know that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. All of us believe that Jesus rose triumphantly from the grave on

Easter morning. All of us take great comfort in the resurrection of Jesus when facing our own deaths or dealing with the deaths of loved ones. This is as it should be.

But do we also see the risen Jesus as personally and powerfully present when we do ordinary, everyday things—go to work or school; sit at home; visit the doctor; buy groceries at IGA; take a walk; dine in a restaurant; attend worship services? How are these ordinary circumstances any different in importance from disciples sitting in a boat, fishing, making small-talk, while wiggling their toes in the blue water of Lake Galilee? They are not different. Through the resurrection appearance recorded in John 21, the disciples learned that the risen Jesus was involved in everything they did, even fishing on the sea of Galilee. This is a lesson we need to learn too.

The second lesson the disciples learned that day while fishing was that they were fully dependent on the Lord for success—in this instance, yes, literally for catching fish; but Jesus obviously intended His disciples to also apply the same principle to every other aspect and endeavor of their lives; not only as fishermen but also as fishers of men; not only as apostles of Christ but also as husbands, fathers, church leaders, and friends. “I am dependent on Jesus for everything.”

At times, we really don't live that way, do we? We're willing to entrust Jesus with the major crises and problems and endeavors of our lives, but then convince ourselves that we have the innate abilities, strength, and intelligence to manage everything else. “God doesn't buy the groceries; I do. God doesn't drive to the grocery store; I do. God doesn't sign my pay-check; the corporate comptroller does.” And so on.

The fallacy with this type of human logic is that it doesn't trace our abilities to their Source. Yes, you and I may have great abilities, great strength, and great intelligence; and if so, we should use them to the fullest extent possible. But we should also remember who gave us these gifts: God did. We did not create ourselves. Therefore, no matter how gifted we are, our gifts still come from God. And this makes us fully and entirely dependent on him.

In John 21 the disciples who went fishing were excellent fishermen, and in some cases even professional fishermen. They knew the Sea of Galilee. They knew boats. They knew the local weather patterns. They knew the best places and best times to fish. They knew how to cast nets. And yet when the risen Jesus stood on the shore and called out, “**Friends, haven't you any fish?**” They answered, “**No.**” See, you can have all the wisdom, strength, charm, personality, friends, possessions, connections, and experience in the world and still not “catch a thing.”

And if that's true of fishing, it is certainly true of salvation. Consider the apostle Paul. At one time, Paul, whose original name was Saul, persecuted the Christian Church. He viewed Christianity as a serious threat to Judaism and the laws of Moses. Before coming to faith in Christ, Paul was a very religious man, who thought he could save himself by keeping the commandments and leading a good life—that is, until he encountered the risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus, and learned that salvation does not come through human works but only by divine grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

As a result, Paul never forgot what he was by nature and what Christ made him by grace. We can hear that humble wonder and gratitude in his writings. For example, 1 Timothy 1:12-15. **“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”**

GONE FISHING; obviously a phrase I'm using figuratively this morning to mean anything we attempt to do in life. Are you trying to be successful at work? Are you trying to be a good employee or a good parent or a good spouse or a good influence? Are you trying to raise children to be God-fearing and respectful? Are you trying to cope with serious problems—debt, troubled marriage, poor health? Are you trying to strengthen your faith without a steady, healthy diet of the word of God?

To use the analogy of today's text, if you've GONE FISHING, whatever you are fishing for, how would you answer the question Jesus asked His disciples? **“Friends, haven't you any fish?”** Friends, have you caught anything? Friends, have all your efforts given you the results you want; happiness, peace, forgiveness, the certainty of salvation, and true success?

If your answer is **“No,”** could the reason be that you are trying to go fishing; to do things on your own without the risen Christ. Dear friends, if God makes us go a long night or many days or even months without “catching anything” to teach us how fruitless this type of Christ-less fishing is, praise His holy name. All I know is what my Bible tells me. In John 15:5 Jesus said, **“Without Me you can do nothing.”** And conversely, Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13, **“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”**

The third lesson the disciples learned while fishing was that true happiness and true answers to life's problems are always found in the word of God. Note carefully the text: **“So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, ‘Friends, haven’t you any fish?’ ‘No,’ they answered. He said, ‘Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.’ When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish,”** John 21:3-6.

No one needs a theological diploma to understand the important lesson taught by these verses. When the disciples chose the fishing locations on their own, they caught nothing. But when they fished where Jesus told them to fish, their nets were bulging with fish.

The same principle is true in life. Follow the word of God, and you’ll find happiness, success, and answers. Follow different advice, you won’t catch anything worth keeping. Throughout the entire Bible, in its thousands of verses and hundreds of familiar characters, there has never been a single exception to this principle. Not one.

Had Adam and Eve listened to God’s word, the world today would be perfect. Instead, it is full of pain, sin, misery, and death. When Abraham followed God’s word, the result was Isaac. When he listened to Sarah’s advice, the result was Ishmael. And the conflict between these two different sons of Abraham—Isaac, the ancestor of the Jews, and Ishmael, the ancestor of the Arabs—has been raging ever since. Whenever the Israelites followed God’s word, their nation enjoyed peace and prosperity. Whenever the Israelites turned to false gods, they experienced tragedy, loss, and captivity.

There is an interesting parallel between today’s text and another miraculous catch of fish that occurred earlier in Christ’s ministry, as recorded in Luke 5. On the first occasion, Jesus was sitting in a boat, teaching the multitudes. When finished, He told Simon Peter, **“When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, ‘Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down nets.’ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that that their nets began to break,”** Luke 5:4-6.

Are you searching for answers today? If so, where are you looking? Are you casting your net where God says to cast it—into the deep, refreshing waters of His word? Or are you fishing someplace else? At times, the word of God may appear so

small, so ineffective, when compared to the size of our problems. Advice like “Stay close to God’s word” or “Turn to the Scriptures” may seem out-of-touch or even silly.

The disciples fished all night and caught nothing. How silly the advice of Jesus may have seemed to them, “**Cast the net on the right side of the boat.**” But when the disciples listened to His word, they achieved what they set out to do. You see, wherever the word of God directs us is always the *right* side of the boat.

GONE FISHING. What fishing tips have we learned today? Remember that the risen Jesus is always with us, wherever we go and whatever we do. Remember that we are fully and entirely dependent on the risen Christ for success. And remember that true happiness and true answers are always found in the risen Christ’s word.

In the meantime, I suggest we all make a large sign and hang it in a prominent place, where we will see it each time we face problems or undertake any endeavor. A sign that reads:

GONE FISHING
WITH THE RISEN CHRIST.
WILL RETURN
WHEN THE NET IS FULL.