John 21:1-19: First Breakfast
Highland Presbyterian Church, 4 May 2025
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Our gospel reading comes from the last chapter in the book of John, chapter 21 (CEB). Listen with me for God's good word to us.

> Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: [2] Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two other disciples were together.[3] Simon Peter told them, "I'm going fishing."
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> They said, "We'll go with you." They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing. [4] Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't realize it was Jesus.
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> [5] Jesus called to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?"
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> They answered him, "No."
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> [6] He said, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net.
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> [7] Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water. [8] The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they weren't far from shore, only about one hundred yards.
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> [9] When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. [10] Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you've just caught." [11] Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn't torn, even with so many fish.
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> [12] Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. [13] Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. [14] This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.
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> [15] When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"
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> Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you."
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> Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."
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> [16] Jesus asked a second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"
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> Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you."
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> Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep."
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> [17] He asked a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

> Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" He replied, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you."
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> Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. [18] I assure you that when you were younger you tied your own belt and walked around wherever you wanted. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will tie your belt and lead you where you don't want to go." [19] He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.
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> After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me."

Mary Magdalene finds Jesus' empty tomb on Easter morning, the Gospel of John tells us. Soon she *meets* the risen Jesus and she tells the disciples that good news. Last Sunday Megan unfolded the story of Jesus showing up behind locked doors to breathe peace on his disciples. Later he arrives among them again and invites Thomas to touch his resurrected body. All these stories are from John chapter 20, which reads like an ending to the gospel.

So isn't it weird that here in chapter 21 the disciples have gone back to their day jobs, as if the *cross* has put an end to Jesus' story? If they've shared all these resurrection experiences, why don't they recognize Jesus' voice or appearance this time? One of my seminary professors writes about this oddity. She says that John 21 might have been written a little later, and it's like another parallel ending to the gospel, a bonus chapter. If John 20 focuses on Jesus being risen, John 21 focuses on the transformed futures of the disciples, especially the Beloved Disciple and Peter.

When mystery fades, once love cools, we tend to fall back into our patterns. After trauma abates, or if one's life is up in the air, we often gravitate back to what we know. Maybe it's the family business. That relationship you just can't quit. Or some other familiar groove that, for better or worse, your life keeps dropping into.

So Peter says, "I'm going fishing." It's what he knows. The other three gospels tell us that before Jesus took Peter on a mind-blowing three-year pilgrimage, Peter fished. And not as a hobby. It's probably how he put food on the table.

After everything Peter has seen, now the sea calls him again, or maybe he's just hungry, and half the disciples join him for an overnight fishing trip. So at least they're still a community. But the old ways don't always get us what we want. Peter's efforts bring no fish.

Then at daybreak somebody back on the shore yells, "Hey, try over on that side instead." Okay, nothing to lose. *Fish*. All the fish.

Recognition dawns. The disciples' hearts burst with *awareness* like the fish are bursting the net. *It's the Lord*.

Pilots have little motivation to jump out of a perfectly good airplane. Skydivers, however, are a different breed. Peter does some first-century skydiving here, leaping out of a perfectly good boat. If this sounds familiar, you might remember a story in Matthew when Peter jumps out of a boat to go meet Jesus walking across stormy water. Here, this disciple who vehemently denied knowing Jesus now swims with all his might to get back to his Lord faster than the boat can travel.

Jesus has stoked up a charcoal fire for cooking breakfast, reminiscent of the charcoal fire around which Peter blurted his denials a few nights earlier. We readers know something is coming. After breakfast it does. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Can we hear Jesus' question as a human one, as a vulnerable question whose answer matters for Jesus as well as for Peter?

Peter, is your heart with me? Yes? Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

Jesus says earlier in John, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Now, after laying down his life, and in the power of God taking it back up again, Jesus calls his disciples into brave shepherding too, starting with Peter.

I learned this week that in a traditional Ghanaian wedding, the bride is asked three times if she's willing to marry the groom. The repetition is to make sure that it's her choice and that no one is coercing her into the marriage.[1]

Jesus offers Peter, too, a triple dose of freedom. There's no need to recount Peter's apostasy. No confessing or groveling. No performance improvement plan. Just three invitations for Peter to express his love freely. Jesus uses two different words for love, and he calls the flock both lambs and sheep, so even the language bubbles with abundance.

His challenge is simple and clear. If you love the Good Shepherd, you'll find yourself shepherding his world, loving your neighbors. This is what discipleship looks like all through the gospel. So it shouldn't be news to Peter, or to us. Love each other as I have loved you. It's as easy and as hard as that. Peter gets three chances to take that leap, to skydive into servant leadership that just might cost him everything. And he wholeheartedly commits.

One scholar memorably calls John chapter 21 an "archive of excess."[2] You might think I read an excess of verses a few minutes ago — we heard most of the chapter. And in this chapter lavishness erupts everywhere: "the one hundred fifty-three fish, the breakfast waiting even before the fish are hauled to shore, the strength of the nets, the repeated question of Jesus to Peter, the discipleship of Peter and the Beloved Disciple, the limitless character of Jesus' deeds."[3]

That last phrase refers to the way this chapter, and the whole gospel, comes to an end. The final verse reads, "Jesus did many other things as well. If all of them were recorded, I imagine the world itself wouldn't have enough room for the scrolls that would be written." (21:25)

Amid all the bounty, Jesus calls, "Come and have breakfast." Resurrected Jesus hosts breakfast on the beach for his friends, serving them fish and bread and forgiveness and hope. No one goes away hungry.

And Jesus extends his breakfast club all the way to this table. Like with Peter, Jesus beckons each of us to be fed, forgiven, and free again to follow. In a world as self-destructive as ours, thank God for nourishing Christ's disciples with excessive love and grace!

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[1] https://www.theknot.com/content/ghana-traditional-wedding
[2] David McCracken, quoted by Beverly Roberts Gaventa in "The Archive of Excess: John 21 and the Problem of Narrative Closure." *Exploring the Gospel of John.* R Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996. p. 242.
[3] Gaventa. p. 249.

Whatever you need to better love your neighbor,
whatever shores us up to resist every form of evil,
whatever enables you to tend the sheep,
whatever opens us toward reconciliation,
whatever empowers your spirit to love the Good Shepherd,
and to love *like* the Good Shepherd,
abundant nourishment for all that starts right here.

Poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes muses about this beach breakfast and offers us this:

> Jesus had a distinctive way of sharing bread:
> taking, blessing, breaking, giving.
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> He did it at the Last Supper,
> but it wasn't the last.
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> He'd done it at the Everlasting Lunch,
> feeding 5000.
>
> And now he does it at the First Breakfast,
> an Easter breaking of the fast of the cross.
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> Resurrection is escape from every confine,
> even of time and space.
>
> In every meal, every morsel,
> Jesus is so present he's edible.
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> The Beloved is here, now,
> though we seldom dare ask, "Who are you?"
>
> You don't need to ask
> if you taste.[4]

In the name of the Host, the Guest, and the Meal.

[4] Garnaas-Holmes, Steve. "The First Breakfast." Posted 30 April 2025. https://unfoldinglight.net