

3rd Sunday of Easter

Sermon 4.14.13

Scripture: Acts 9:1-20
John 21:1-14

I used to walk home from church—my sister and I. Our parents taking too long at coffee hour, talking with too many friends they'd seen the week before and would see a week hence, we'd walk home, a twenty-minute walk, and then when we moved a little closer to the church, a ten-minute walk. Sometimes, our parents, having left coffee hour at last, would come upon us on our way home, and they'd stop to pick us up. But sometimes we'd make it home before they did.

That was fine. I like to walk, always have.

That said, one of the most despairing details from scripture, I think, is this one, Peter saying to Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples: "I'm going fishing"—not that fishing itself is despairing, nor would Peter have thought it so. After all, he'd spent most of his adult life as a fisherman. I think it's fair to conclude that he enjoyed it, found it fulfilling.

And yet.

"I'm going fishing."

This 21st chapter of John's gospel is as tacked on to the end. Consider: in the 20th chapter of this book, we have morning and we have evening, and then we have an evening a week later, and then we have a conclusion. Yes, it's a clunky conclusion, an awkward one. But it's a conclusion nonetheless.

See, in the morning, Mary has come to the garden of the tomb, which she finds empty—not the garden but the tomb. The garden, though, is being overseen by a man, whom Mary assumes is the gardener. It isn't though; it's the resurrected Christ, Jesus. He's the same, but also different. She doesn't recognize him, not until he speaks to her name. Then she *does* recognize him and, overjoyed, she reaches out for him. But he tells her, "Do not cling to me for I haven't yet returned to the Father."

Do not *cling* to me. It's often translated, "Do not touch me," but it's better translated, "Do not *cling* to me." In some certain way, she was to let him go, go on ahead. In some certain way, *we* are to let him go. Go on ahead.

So, instead she goes and tells the others.

A few come to the tomb to see for themselves.

Then, in the evening, the disciples have gathered behind locked doors in fear, and Jesus comes to them—to all of them but Thomas, who has, for some reason, gone out. When he returns, he gets some bittersweet news, that they all have seen the Lord, but him.

A week later, the disciples are still gathered, or again gathered, and Jesus comes again, which allows Thomas the chance to see him and now to believe.

And then, that's it: "Now Jesus did many other signs," the narrative tells us, "signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But *these* are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

And, like I said, that's it. There it is. The gospel of John finished for posterity's sake.

But then someone came along with a bit more to say. "After these things..." the narrative voice starts in, though making use of none of the language so characteristic of this gospel. There's no talk of "abiding"—of Jesus as abiding in God or God abiding in Jesus or the disciples abiding in the Father through their abiding amidst the Son. There's no play on the invitation, "Come and see," no imperative of "believing" in Jesus, and no self-understanding of Jesus in terms of "I am..." Most glaringly absent, if also vaguely so, is that the language of this story doesn't reverberate with meaning, *entendre* on top of *entendre*. There's something straightforward about the way language works in this 21st chapter of John: it's a vehicle for plain meaning rather than a code for what we used to call in high school English class the "Deep Hidden Meaning," the "DHM."

No DHM here: Jesus simply stood on the beach and watched as these once fishermen were back at it, fishing in this terribly familiar sea, this dully earth-bound sea. They hadn't managed to catch anything, which Jesus noticed. So he suggested from where he stood this distance away, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some."

And this sounds suggestive, right? This sounds portentous in some way, as if Jesus meant to speak metaphorically, deep-hidden-meaningfully, right? And so there have been countless sermons about making slight adjustments when you meet with un-success. When some effort of yours is frustrated, when some attempt you make fails to meet its aim, perhaps it's just a matter of trying again though with some small changes.

Or maybe it's about being on the right side...?

Really, what did Jesus mean by this and what does it mean for us?

I'd suggest nothing. I'd suggest that Jesus, or anyone, standing on the beach could perhaps see what those in the boat couldn't—a flurry of fish, a different shade and movement of water that

indicated a school of them, ready for the catch. I'd suggest this is just plain speak, a simple piece of advice that would rightly mean nothing to us.

Same with the number of fish caught, this stubbornly unsymbolic number, 153. Why that number? Why not forty, or seventy, or seventy times seven? I'd suggest this as why: because it's the actual number that they caught. I suggest that the story is simply telling us a thing that happened. And sometimes actual events don't portend of spiritual realities and assurances. Sometimes how things *actually* are isn't pointing to some abiding spiritual truth—which is itself an assurance of an abiding spiritual truth. Some things just are what they are, which the 21st chapter of John seems fine with.

Me too. I like that the resurrected Christ is as concerned with getting some breakfast for his friends as he is that Peter get out there and feed Christ's other lambs. I like that the world in which the resurrected Christ yet lived and moved and had his being is a world wherein you might catch 153 fish, and you might have nine eggs in your refrigerator and 14,783 miles on your odometer and four pairs of dirty underpants in your hamper. Things don't always line up. Things aren't always so throbbing with meaning. There is coherence to it all, but not always evidently so—not when you're in the boat, so to speak, embedded in the unfolding of events. From that perspective, from *this* perspective, there's a lot we can't see.

That's where faith comes in.

One thing Peter apparently couldn't see is the breadth of the scope of where all this would lead. "Feed my lambs," Jesus told Peter once they had finished breakfast. "Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." And Peter, good disciple, insisted he would. He actually got a little defensive around Jesus' talk about this. "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." He'd said so three times, after all. What more did Jesus want?

I think Jesus wanted Peter to recognize, to remember, what he had said earlier, that there are other sheep not of this fold, which were, and are, to be brought in as well.

Peter would, though, continue to resist this. He would continue to work among the people he knew, while Paul, Paul would insist on setting out even to the Gentiles, and then especially to the Gentiles.

In fact, this was a central argument among the first apostles—how widely they should teach and preach in Jesus' name, among what lands and peoples should they gather followers in the Way?

Those who knew Jesus when he was alive and teaching himself would tend to stay close to home. Paul, though, the first prominent one to be brought in after Jesus had lived and died: Paul

would set out wider and further abroad—and perhaps because he could. As a Roman citizen he was perhaps more free to travel throughout the Roman world, which made it so he'd preach and teach among people who'd be less violently resistant to it. As a Roman citizen, also, Paul was free not to meet an end as Peter would meet—crucified as only a non-citizen could suffer, taken to where he did not wish to go, as Jesus put it.

So, perhaps Paul was more capable than Peter of imagining sheep though not of their fold, and capable also of reaching these sheep, and finally safer for preaching amidst people who had little to lose if Jesus was in fact the Messiah. The Gentiles had little at stake in the possibility that a crucified man might be the long-promised Messiah, so anyone who proclaimed this might not meet with much resistance. So, perhaps also Jesus was sussing this out: would Peter be someone who could imagine so broad a scope? He insisted he could. Three times he said it, that he would feed Jesus' sheep, that he would feed Jesus' lambs, that he would tend the sheep. But it's not a conversation that inspires much confidence—except that Peter did love Jesus. On that count I believe him.

It all makes me wonder, though, what would have happened if Peter hadn't decided, perhaps in disappointment, even deep disappointment, "I'm going fishing." So much had happened—so much that was great, exciting, so much that was ripe with promise and possibility; so much that was dark and dramatic, confusing, frightening. They together had come so close to life, and come so close to death. This man they'd come to follow—they'd really begun to believe in him. He was the Messiah, the one sent to save but not in the way that they'd thought. He was the one sent to save not just the people Israel but everyone, *everyone*, the whole creation made now complete. Yet unfinished, imperfect, this one come to save would finish it all.

Hadn't he said from the cross, "It is finished"? But how can it be that the *crucified* one is the one sent to save? How can it be that in being *crucified* he is thus saving?

But then how could it be otherwise? For one distinctive thing about this God whom Israel knew and of whom the people Israel told the story, "in the beginning," is that this God didn't battle the creation into being. There was no grand cosmic war at the start of it all that it got it all going. No, this God simply spoke, and it was.

(Abracadabra is derivative of the Hebrew, *Avra k'divra*, which means, "I speak it into being," or "I create as the word," or "I create as I speak.")

So, it of course make sense as regards this God that the act of saving might also not be battling, fighting back against those powers and principalities that seem dominance, engaging

violence and evil on its own terms, but would be self-giving love, which comes in the form of a cross.

But then he really died. Yes, of course, he'd give himself over, he'd allow the powers and principalities to do their worst.

But then he really died. And he was really buried. And he really just lay there.

That Sabbath was hardly restful, hardly peaceful.

Whatever.

But then some of their women saw him, and then Peter himself had saw him in that upper room where they were locked away,, and he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," which means who knows what? I mean, really, all of this clearly means something, but who knows what? What's next? Here, then gone. Here again, then gone again. And now they were all back home, all back in Galilee, all back at the seaside of this terribly familiar sea. And what were they to do? Wait? Come up with a plan?

His mind was swimming, I imagine.

"I'm going fishing."

Last Saturday, I walked home from church. Back home, back in North Hampton, New Hampshire, where I grew up, I made that short walk home, back to where my mother and Buzz live, where I used to live.

Mr. Miller had died—Mr. Miller of the Millers, among my parents' oldest friends; and now was his funeral, there in my home church, where I'd spent nearly every Sunday morning for 26 years (minus my college years), and since starting divinity school twenty years ago, only about four.

Weird that in discerning a call to serve the church, I'm all but cut off from my home church.

Mr. Miller and my dad had started at Eastern Airlines together as pilots, in the same training class of 1969. The Millers and my parents both moved to North Hampton around the same time, each in a recently-built subdivision, both recently colonized by airline pilots. (No income tax in New Hampshire!) They each joined the church in town around the same time—they and their two sons, and my parents and (eventually) their two daughters. Around the same time my sister and I came to be, we began spending Thanksgiving together, one year at their house and the next at ours—their house always more fun because they had a pool table.

The service was moving to me, much more than I anticipated it would be. Brad and Tim were there with their families, these whom I hadn't seen in 25 years. But also all the other pilot families—the Oars and the Hilliers and the Hiltunens and the and the Robies, none still flying, all

too old now. Plus, there were the other people from church—the Moores and the Moultons, Mrs. Sherouse, my school librarian, and Frannie Winch, who was still an old church lady. She has *always* been an old church lady, with powdered face and sprayed up hair. The last person I spoke to was someone from my more present, their current pastor with whom I went to divinity school.

Then I'd had enough. I wanted to walk home. My mom and Buzz had already left, but my dad and Judy were still there. I went up to them, "I'm going to walk home. My car's at mom's."

"We'll drive you," he said.

"No, I want to walk."

Heading down the slope to Post Road: when I was eighteen years old, Frank Lorenzo bought Eastern Airlines. This followed President Reagan's deregulating the industry in 1981, under the guidance of Elizabeth Dole who was secretary of transportation, and this triggered a tough decade for the airlines, everything in turmoil, everything for sale. (The movie *Wall Street* was about all this.)

Hostile takeovers now a real likelihood, first the air traffic controllers went on strike. But Reagan declared this an illegal strike, so they returned to work, chastened and cowed. Then came the ticket agents and flight attendants, but their strike wasn't successful. Everybody's work just became more demoralizing, workplace more stressful and chance for a reliable livelihood deeply threatened.

Once Lorenzo got ahold of Eastern and started stripping it of its assets, the Airline Pilots' Association organized their own strike. It was the first labor strike ever whose terms weren't higher pay but a more principled stance, some regulation that makes hostile takeovers less inevitable.

The funny thing is, these guys were all Republicans. They'd all voted for Reagan. They'd all come up through the military and were now living the good life—in their split-levels, driving their station-wagons, attending their kids' soccer games and school concerts because they could bid their trips around such things. They had seniority!

Now, though, they were Union guys, walking the picket line.

I walked with them. I learned about scabs, and knew that my father lost a good friend for his becoming one. I learned the art of yelling at cars as they drove into the Eastern terminal at Logan Airport. I learned to call Elizabeth Dole "Liddy" (she hated that nickname!) and Frank Lorenzo was akin Pontius Pilate or Darth Vader.

Eventually, Eastern folded and Dad lost his job. They all did, of course.

Coincidentally, Brad Miller got married at the same time and his parents started going to his new home for Thanksgiving.

A couple years later, my dad left my mom, around the same time my first attempt at adulthood fizzled, so having me move home.

A couple years later still, I enrolled at divinity school, and a couple years after that I began working at other churches.

For twenty years, my life was marked by stunning regularity. Everything held.

Over the course of six years, nearly everything changed.

For the last fifteen years my life has settled into stunning regularity.

I lost a lot. I gained a lot. I'm still exactly the same person I ever was.

"I'm going to walk home."

And there goes Lou Johnson's old place, fixed up now. When this was my newspaper route, he tipped me a dollar. Not bad for a weekly that cost twenty-five cents. Across the street was Post Road Grocery, long closed now. That had been a good place to get Swedish Fish and soft-serve in the summer time.

There was the Colcord's. Ann died a few years ago while kayaking. We don't think it was an accident. She'd struggled for a long time. I think Jim and the boys are doing okay.

Then the Silverstone's. Barbara's spirited as ever, and Arnie's always engineering something in his garage. There's the Goodwill's, and the Hadfield's, and up on the hill my mom's. By the time I reached the driveway, I was ready to go home. A group of friends was having a birthday party for each of their 42nd. IT was a dance party, the themes was the 80s, but I figured I'd be too tired to give it much thought so I'd just dressed as if it were now.

Then, of course, there was church in the morning.

Last time I preached on this story of Peter going fishing, I concluded, God is transformation and God is continuity; Resurrection is transformation and Resurrection is continuity. It's always nice to discover you might have been on to something.

Thanks be to God.