

Reflection for May 1, 2022

**John 21:1-19 - Abundance**

*Welcome and Peace ...*

One of the things we do with the children when we read the sacred story is that we often wonder together -this is a technique used in Godly Play. You may have notice that I sneak some wonderings into my reflections, but I don't often give you time to respond in the moment. So today I wanted to change that, here is an opportunity for you to response to the gospel story from the book of John.

I wonder what your favourite part of the story is?

I wonder if there is any part of the story that could be left out and we would still have the complete story?

I wonder where God is in the story?

I wonder where you are in the story?

This is the last story of the risen Jesus appearing to his followers. It is filled with so many of the themes found in John: seeing/knowing/recognizing who Jesus is, abundance in the midst of scarcity, and love. At its heart, it is a call story. A story of discipleship – how to be in the world without Jesus' physical presence.

When you have suffered a bereavement or trauma, it can feel as though the rug has been pulled from under your feet. The laws of physics still exist and the world keeps on revolving, but the axis upon which your life turns is missing. There is a sense of being lost or inadequate in the face of life's daily challenges. It is draining to process the conflict between life as it was supposed to be and life as it is now. Many of us have felt that over the last couple of years, either through the collective trauma that Covid 19 has brought, or our own individual ordeals.

In this week's reading, we join the disciples as they continue to come to terms with the shocking events of Easter and their new reality. The Messiah they had followed had died and risen again, but once more they were without him. They had left their ordinary lives to follow the extraordinary Jesus. They had travelled many miles with him, encountered innumerable challenges with him, shared many meals together, and then watched him die, their dreams of a radically

altered world seeming to die with him. Deep in grief, they were questioning everything they had believed.

They have seen Jesus alive, some of them twice, but they are so traumatized by all they have been through that they have trouble accepting it as truth. They had been so sure that he was the Messiah and his death had made them doubt themselves. Having locked themselves away for protection, they had time and space to contemplate their experiences and to wallow in their grief, disappointment, doubt and pain. Every disciple would have dealt with these emotions differently.

Why could Jesus not stay with them? How could life go back to any kind of normal? What was real? What were they to do now?

I was in my early 20s when my friend Jaye Dee died. We knew each other through church youth retreats. She had survived childhood cancer, but the treatments had affected her heart and she died of cardiomyopathy. Only a few weeks before we had been at her bachelorette party. The day of her death, a group of her friends went mini-golfing. We knew we didn't want to be alone in our grief, and mini-golfing was one of those activities we had done a millions times at different youth retreats. It seems silly, but it was familiar and comforting. It reminded us of her. It was something to *do*.

So, I can understand when some of the disciples found the room too claustrophobic and needed to get out. "I am going fishing," says Simon Peter. And a group of them travelled with him to the Sea of Tiberius (aka the Sea of Galilee).

Despite having fished all night, they had caught nothing. They must have been disappointment. I wonder if it caused them to doubt themselves again. The inner conflict between living in the past and the present, the world as it is and the world as you had hoped it would be, can be disorientating.

During this time when they are feeling vulnerable, a stranger calls out from the beach to suggest that they fish on the other side. Would they have accepted this advice from someone they did not know under normal circumstances? Maybe they welcomed someone telling them what to do at a time when they had lost all sense of direction and purpose.

When they notice that their haul is much greater than they could have expected, the realization dawns that this is no stranger. It is the Beloved disciple who first

recognizes Jesus, “It is the Lord!” (John 21:7). In response, Peter does the strangest thing. Even in his desperation to get to Jesus first, he takes time to get dressed, to cover his nakedness before jumping into the water. Reminiscent of Adam and Eve, Peter recognizes his vulnerability and covers it up.

The other disciples follow in the boat, bringing their abundant catch with them. When they reach Jesus on the shore, there is bread, and fish cooking on the fire. And it is here that Jesus addresses both their physical and spiritual needs. There is no rush here, they take their time to sit by the fire and eat. Jesus nourishes them as he nourishes us. He meets them on the beach to assure them that he has risen and will continue to be with them through the challenges to come.

This text is rich with confusion and strange responses and a group of people trying to process their traumatic experiences. They are trying to reconcile themselves to a life they were not expecting and orient themselves in a world they do not understand. They are trying to find their place and identity, even as they doubt themselves.

But here we see the risen Christ has pursued them from Jerusalem to Galilee. *I knew I’d find you here, back to your old habits, empty hopes and empty nets. You’re worried you’ve let me down, that you’ve been disqualified — but on the contrary, you’re the ones I’ve chosen. Do you really think I didn’t know your weaknesses when I called you? I knew you better than you knew yourselves, and I called you and taught you and sent you, and now I send you again. Stop thinking in terms of scarcity, of limitations, of what you can’t do! I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly — so think in terms of bounty, of opportunities, of what you CAN do (John 10:10). Look at all these fish, for God’s sake, filling the net to overflowing!*

Peter is perhaps the one who doubts himself the most. After defiantly vowing he would never deny Jesus, three times he denies being a disciple of Jesus (John 13:36-38, John 18:15-27).

And three times, Jesus now asks him to profess his love. The way Peter answers is almost unbearably poignant: “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” — but of course Peter is shamefully aware that what Jesus “knows” is that Peter is foolish and weak, a denier and deserter (John 21:15). And this knowledge makes all the more striking Jesus’ crisp and clear directive: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17). It is not about Peter’s failings, but rather the confidence Jesus continues to show in

him, and in humanity at large, despite all our failings. And that is good news – that is hope. Jesus invites Peter to be part of God’s work – and it all flows out of love. *If you love me, make that love tangible: go and care for those I love. I am the Good Shepherd, and now I’m taking my leave. You, the one who denied and deserted me, you are the one I choose, the one I want to feed my flock in my place.*

In this story we are faced with our own shortcomings, we suspect we are disqualified, or unqualified, or in any case incapable of contributing to the movement of God in our world. We drift back to our old lives in Galilee. Or perhaps we sense the power of new life, the promise of the risen Jesus, even the helpful contributions we might make — but we’re afraid. Being a disciple is one thing, following along beside the good rabbi; but being an apostle is another, “sent forth” up ahead into the unknown. And so we draw back. We retreat. We return to what we know, letting down and pulling up the old, empty nets...

But Jesus will not let us go. Though we may waver, Jesus continues to believe. God knows our shortcomings — and calls and sends us anyway. God knows our fears, and nevertheless looks us in the eye and says (three times!), *Feed my sheep. Put your love for me into action. For you are made in the image of the God of Love-in-Action. This is the life you are made for!*

Thus the central drama of Jesus’ interaction with Peter — and by extension, with the whole group of disciples — is fundamentally about Peter resisting his commission, and Jesus inspiring him to accept it. By withdrawing to Galilee Peter is effectively saying, *I’m not up to this. I’m not the disciple you deserve...*

I feel for Peter. I have resisted the call myself. I didn’t want to leave my family and friends, my entire support system, and move to Ontario. But hindsight following that call was a gift, bringing new people to love into my life, new work to do in God’s name.

But Jesus is having none of it: *This isn’t about your failure or your fears. Do you love me? Then feed my sheep! Stop dwelling on what you did or didn’t do in the past, or even what you can or cannot do in the future. Stop focusing on your limits, and focus on your love. Do you love me? (Peter replies, Well, of course I love you, you know that — ) Then feed my sheep! It’s that simple. Step up and get to work. I’ve sent you, and I know whom I’m sending. I believe in you. Now, go!*

Of course, Peter has his limits; but if his love for Jesus is genuine, it must become love-in-action, even if such love will involve difficulties on the path ahead. Peter's reluctance here is why Jesus asks him the question three times, pushing him to realize this fundamental point, to focus on his love, take courage, and act: *Follow me* (John 21:19).

Last night I was at St. Matthias Anglican Church, listening to a folk singer from Cardiff – Martyn Joseph. I don't usually go out on a "school night," but I was glad I did, and not just for the great music. Martyn talked about his foundation, which gives to small, grassroots organizations. Groups who used every penny to make someone else's life better whether it was working with displaced persons from Ukraine or an arts group in Palestine. Over the years he has support 14 different initiatives. He called it a portfolio of hope. It made me think of Rob Porter's Internet for Humanity and For the Love of Africa.

"Feed my sheep."

Jesus is sending them into the world, taking over his work. They are being invited to do what Christ did. The stakes are high because God so loved the *world*. The disciples are the ones who live out God's love in the world. And we have inherited that calling from them.

"Feed my sheep."

This call — toward living lives of love-in-action — is what all the "signs and wonders" in John are for in the first place: to draw our attention, to open our hearts and minds to God's right-side-upping of the world, and to inspire us to play our part in this dawning era of abundant grace. Even the signs and wonders themselves are too many to count. The gospel of John ends this way: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

# Changed

*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach;  
but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. —John 21.4*

Mary thought he was the gardener.  
The disciples on the road to Emmaus  
thought he was a newcomer.  
Why didn't they recognize him?  
Because he'd been changed.

Resurrection isn't "coming back to life;"  
it's going on to a new life. It's transformation.  
When Jesus rose, Mary reported it to the disciples.  
They didn't believe it.  
They were still in an upper room, behind locked doors.  
They had heard about resurrection,  
but it hadn't changed them yet.

Too often I live as if  
resurrection has not actually happened.  
I am still afraid, still doubting.  
Still ready to go back to fishing with Peter,  
back to the old life.

I don't want to be changed. I say I do, but  
there is still much I hang onto.  
To be raised is to let go of everything,  
everything I want to cling to, even fear,  
and only love.  
Am I willing?  
Willing to cast my net in a different way?

Risen Jesus, draw me up out of this life  
into a new one.

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[www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net)

**Sources:**

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Feasting on the Word commentary

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