

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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A Renewed Sense of Vocation

John 21:1-19

On the back of his boat, Peter had one of those stickers that says, "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." You see, even after Jesus has been raised from the dead, there are still bills to pay. The mortgage. Payroll for the hired help. Obligations on his small business loan. The annual fee for renewing his fishing license. Expenses for boat repairs. The cost of replacing damaged nets. Even if Christ is risen and the kingdom has come, it looks like business as usual isn't completely over in this present world.

Peter and the other disciples are living in this strange segment of time and territory where the risen Jesus has appeared to them, but they're not completely sure what the plan is going forward. In today's text, the scene has shifted from the city to the beach. That's where some of the disciples are gathered, weighing their options. In a way, they seem to be idling. They're uncertain about what could happen next in their ongoing interaction with Jesus. Will he appear to them again? What are his intentions for them? In particular, how does Peter figure into these plans, especially in view of how he denied even knowing Jesus?

At the moment, there are no clear cut answers to these questions. And sitting through another day, speculating about the possibilities, won't pay the bills. So Peter finally says to his peers, "I don't know about you all, but I'm going fishing." And the others decide to go with him.

So back in the boat. Back out on the water. Back to casting their nets. Back to the routine. Back to the familiarity of the life they had known. But how can that be? How is that possible? How could you go back to the regular rhythm of ordinary life after something as world-changing and life-changing as the resurrection? Not that there's anything wrong with fishing. It's a perfectly respectable and honest way to make a living. But when you consider the fact that Peter and the other disciples had been with Jesus during his earthly ministry, had seen the things that they had seen, and had done the things that they had done, how could just up and decide to step back into the plainness and predictability of daily life?

From where we sit, it looks like Peter and the other disciples are drastically lowering their expectations. They're diminishing their hopes. They're downsizing the possibilities created by the Easter event. They're like the characters in DirecTV's current ad campaign that features a family called "The Settlers." In the midst of a modern suburban neighborhood, the Settlers follow a way of life that takes us back in time. They plow their front yard to raise their own crops. They chop their own wood. They eat dinner by candlelight. They offer their neighbors generous portions of fresh milk and salted meats. The children entertain themselves with homemade toys. And most of all, instead of upgrading to DirecTV, they settle for cable. That's just who they are. They're settlers. They settle for things.

In today's Scripture passage, it looks like Peter and the other disciples are willing to settle for so much less. God has rescued Jesus from the grave and launched the life of the world to come, yet Jesus' followers seem content to return to life as they've always known it. They've resigned themselves to business as usual. And what's worse, business as usual is going pretty badly. They've fished all night and have nothing to show for it. Empty nets. Empty dreams. Empty routines.

But all that changes with the rising of the sun and the appearance of the one who is God's light for a dark world. "Friends," he calls out to them. "Friends." Not, "Hey you." Not, "You guys." Instead, "Friends." The term literally means, "children." So Jesus speaks to them using the language of family. With all their faults and failures during his ministry, and all their fear and denial during his suffering and death, and all their misapprehension and faltering faith after he has been raised, Jesus still views them and relates to them with compassion and affection, as members of God's family in need of help and mercy.

And Jesus gives them help in abundance. Apparently they had gotten so locked into the pattern of casting their net on the left side of the boat that they didn't even consider the right side an option. But that's exactly where Jesus tells them to fish. And when they respond to his word with obedience, they gather in more than they can handle. That's the difference that Jesus' presence makes. Without Jesus, nothing. With Jesus, superabundance. The kind of superabundance testified to in the opening chapter of John's Gospel: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (1:16).

When this fullness of grace takes an empty net and fills it to the point of breaking, that's when the disciple whom Jesus loved turns to Peter and says, "It is the Lord!" The same Lord whose glory had been revealed at the wedding in Cana through the abundance of wine. The same Lord whose generosity in giving life had been disclosed at the feeding of the five thousand. The same Lord was now standing on the shore, ready to feed them with the catch that he himself had made possible.

This is partly a story about what's possible when Jesus is present. And when you think about it, that's one of the great dangers with routines. They can diminish our sense of what's possible. When we anchor ourselves firmly in the familiar, when we settle for just doing what we've always been doing, the way we've been doing it, our imaginations grow dull and our expectations drop. We underestimate the power of God, the vitality of his word, and the absolutely certain triumph of his purposes. We get so used to one another, so used to the rhythms of church, and so used to business as usual that we lose a sense of the incredible abundance of life that God gives through the Son.

That's the downside of routines. But I think that the upside of routines is also present in today's text. Notice that for Peter and the other disciples, what began as just another journey into the daily routine soon became a place of encounter between the living Lord and his followers. For those first disciples, and for the community of believers called the church, that's still how and where we often experience the fullness of God's grace. Sometimes we experience it in the midst of the ordinary, the everyday, and the unspectacular. What we think will be just a matter of getting up and going through the motions of another day ends up being an unplanned encounter with God's life-giving generosity. Somehow, in the midst of routine, there is revelation.

"I'm going out to fish," said Peter. "Well go with you," replied the others. Not a particularly ambitious agenda for the day. But sometimes that's the scale and the scope of what we need to be doing, and what God intends us to do. In a blog, John Koessler writes about

some of the plans that the character named George Bailey had in Frank Capra's classic film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Koessler quotes Bailey, who says to his wife Mary,

"Mary, I know what I'm going to do tomorrow and the next day and the next year and the year after that. I'm going to leave this little town far behind, and I'm going to see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the Coliseum. Then I'm coming back here, and I'll go to college and see what they know, and then I'm going to build things. I'm going to build air fields. I'm going to build skyscrapers a hundred stories high. I'm going to build bridges a mile long."

According to Koessler,

As it turns out, George is wrong. He doesn't know what he's going to do tomorrow and the next day and the next year and the year after that. As it turns out, what he is supposed to do tomorrow is pretty much what he did today. God's plan for him is to do the ordinary thing—which, of course, is the last thing that George wants to do. If you remember another famous scene from the film, you know that George Bailey wants to lasso the moon.

But many times, says Koessler, what God wants for us is much more down to earth. Doesn't Christ often want us "to lower our sights and put away our lasso? To seek the good of the small places in which he has placed us and to confer distinction upon them by serving him with humility there? The path of glory is often an obscure one. It is the way of the cross."¹

One of the reasons we have the Lord's Table set before us this morning is to help keep us on the way of the cross, the vocation called following Jesus. Remember that after the story of the miraculous catch of fish comes the story of Peter's conversation with Jesus, who brings Peter back into a restored relationship of love and discipleship. By the end of their conversation, Jesus speaks to Peter the same words that had started it all: "Follow me."

That's the invitation that we too need to hear again today. "Follow me." Yes, we believe that Christ died for our sins. Yes, we believe that God raised him from the dead. Yes, we believe that he's coming again to bring God's reign to fulfillment. But in the meantime, he not only meets us where we are, but also goes on ahead us, and calls us to follow his path into the future. That future unfolds as we enter into each day's seemingly ordinary, yet sacred, routines, trusting that Jesus is there, providing what's needed, giving abundant life, and accomplishing more than we expect or realize.

¹ John Koessler, "George Bailey Lassos the Moon," on his blog *A Stranger in the House of God*. March 18, 2010.