

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Muchness of Jesus

John 21:1-14

“Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31). That’s the way John 20 ends. It’s a compelling summary of everything John has told us about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So you would think this is a great way to wrap up the whole story and close the book.

But this conclusion isn’t really the end. John isn’t finished. He takes us from the upper room to the beach, where some of Jesus’ disciples are hanging out, contemplating where to go with their lives from here. One option is to continue doing what you’ve been doing. So Peter says, “I’m going fishing.” At first, this sounds like a strange choice, given the fact that Peter and the other disciples have recently been visited by the risen Jesus. After an experience like that, how can you just go back to business as usual? Shouldn’t Peter, Thomas, and the others be out there preaching instead of fishing?

But then again, we know from Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus had characterized his disciples’ mission as “fishing for people” (4:19). And as good as John is at using rich themes and symbolic imagery to unfold the significance of Jesus, we shouldn’t be completely surprised that after God has raised Jesus from the dead, going forward requires some going back. Back to the boats and the nets. Back out on the lake. Back to doing what they knew how to do.

And yet in this case the disciples aren’t doing it very well. After spending all night out on the water, casting and pulling in their net, they’ve come up empty. All that effort, and nothing to show for it. Until the sun rises, and things begin to change.

The change doesn’t happen because the disciples muster more determination, or get their hands on better equipment, or improve their technique. No, the change happens because Jesus is shows up. At first, they don’t recognize him, but rest assured that he knows them. He knows their inadequacy. He knows their exhaustion. He knows their disappointment and frustration. He knows their sense of failure. He knows their need for help.

“Friends, haven’t you any fish?” Jesus’ question may indicate that he himself is hungry. A resurrected body still has an appetite. But this isn’t primarily a story about what Jesus needs. In fact, by the end of the story, Jesus is the one who will be feeding the disciples, because this is a story about what they need. They need the presence of Jesus. They need his word. They need him to speak into their situation of futility and emptiness. And when Jesus does, emptiness becomes abundance. The catch is more than the disciples can handle.

Large fish, says John. One hundred fifty-three of them, to be precise. John must have a fondness for details. I recall some other numbers way back at the beginning of his Gospel.

Six stone water jars, each one holding twenty to thirty gallons. That was the situation at a wedding celebration in Cana. Joy was plentiful, partly because wine was plentiful. But soon the supply ran out, and so did the joy. The party began to wither. Emptiness set in. But Jesus spoke the word, water became wine, and emptiness turned into abundance. Jars filled to the brim. Nets filled to the breaking point. In John's Gospel, Jesus' first miracle and his final miracle are acts of extravagance and abundance.

In between these two, there are lots of other signs. One of them also involved fish. Not 153 large ones. In this case, just two little ones. Jesus used them, along with five small loaves, to feed a multitude (John 6:1-15). Once, again, through the presence and power of Jesus, a little became a lot, with some to spare. There was more than enough for everyone.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says, "Filled with God's generosity, Jesus went around to people suffering from scarcity—of health, of acceptance, of power, of understanding—and replaced it with a gift of abundance."¹ To confess Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, involves you in his ongoing mission of bringing abundance into places of scarcity. Considering the level of financial and material abundance that most of us have experienced, compared to many others in our society and the world, one of the ways we can practice the resurrection is by extending the generosity of Jesus into the lives of others.

To do that, we need to be more aware of how scarcity and abundance shape our lives, as individuals, as communities, as a nation, and as the world. We live in a world where the gap between scarcity and abundance seems to be growing all the time. This gap between those with much and those with little is one of the factors that drives a lot of the division and fuels a lot of the tension in our society. In some ways, COVID-19 has made matters worse. During the past year, the pandemic has exposed, and in some ways intensified, economic inequities and social injustices that were already present. Now they're more visible and in even greater need of remedy.

This is part of what happens when we live with a scarcity mentality. As Brueggemann says, "The issue involves whether there is enough to go around—enough food, water, shelter, space. An ideology of scarcity says no, there's not enough, so hold onto what you have. In fact, don't just hold onto it, hoard it. Put aside more than you need, so that if you do need it, it will be there, even if others must do without."²

Think back to around this time last year. Remember all those empty store shelves that once held hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes. Remember encountering some outrageous online prices for life's essentials. Remember viral videos of customers fighting with each other over toilet paper. Remember people exiting warehouse stores with their shopping carts overflowing with unnecessary quantities of household goods. Whatever our level of risk from the coronavirus, it soon became clear how much we're already infected with a scarcity mindset. In so many areas of life, we operate on the conviction that there's not enough to go around, so do whatever it takes to preserve and protect yourself, even if it comes at the expense of others.

But the reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ tells us something very different. The God we worship and serve is a God of abundance not scarcity. A God who raises the dead. A God who creates and gives life. Earlier in John's Gospel, when Jesus reveals himself as the good shepherd, he says he has come so that the community of his people "may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10, NRSV). Jesus isn't saying that faithfulness and devotion to him will guarantee a life of financial and material prosperity. True, the new life we experience through Christ can enable us to make good decisions and develop patterns of behavior that help us be financially and materially productive. But that's different from

saying that believers will automatically be blessed with better jobs and bigger bank accounts. There is a kind of prosperity that should mark the lives Jesus' followers. It's the prosperity that comes with a life not driven by anxiety, fear, and scarcity, but motivated by the self-giving love of Christ. That kind of abundance—lives filled with the grace, mercy, peace, and wisdom of God—can exist and thrive in all circumstances, including suffering, sorrow, and hardship.

The best place for us to learn and grow into this abundant living is the church, the community of Jesus' people. This is where we cultivate an awareness of and reliance on the goodness and generosity of God. This is where we make progress in lives of sharing and giving, to one another and toward the world. And none of this is easy or automatic. Within the community of God's people, we ourselves often wrestle with fears and anxieties about having enough. What if our church doesn't have enough money? What if we don't have enough people? What if we don't have enough time? What if we don't have enough technology? What if we don't have enough leadership? What if we don't have enough expertise or experience? What if we don't have enough vision? What if we don't have enough resources? Like those disciples repeatedly casting their net into the water, only to pull it up empty, we can begin to feel like all we're doing is laboring away, over and over, in the midst of scarcity. It feels like there's not enough.

But Christ is risen, and he's still coming to us. He's still appearing among us. He's still revealing himself to us. He's still showing up, especially in those times and ways when what we as a church need is provided. Or when we offer Jesus the little that we have, and he does a lot with it. Or when we give beyond ourselves rather than hoarding for ourselves. Or when our congregation's spirits run low and Jesus fills us back up. Or when our mission doesn't seem to be advancing yet Jesus is accomplishing more than we realize or imagine. In all these ways, and many others, we're reminded that though we may feel like we're running low on life, our God never runs out of life.

In the film *Alice in Wonderland*, there's a scene where the Mad Hatter is talking to Alice and tells her that the last time she visited Wonderland she was "much muchier." He says, "You're not the same as you were before. You were much more... Muchier. You've lost your muchness." "My 'muchness'?" asks Alice. The Mad Hatter points to her gut and says, "In there. Something's missing." Maybe the Mad Hatter means that she had lost some of her heart, her spirit, since the last time she visited. She had lost some of who she used to be.

Time and experience can often take their toll on our "muchness." In our individual lives, and in our life together as a church, we can go through things or encounter things that leave us feeling less than we used to be. We may start to run low in spiritual vitality, thinking that we're not much, or that we don't have much. But as today's text reminds us, because the risen Jesus is still present, revealing himself to us and working through us, we draw upon his aliveness. There's a muchness about Jesus that enables us and empowers us. He possesses life in abundance. And when you're joined to him by faith, his aliveness works in you, and in our life as a congregation. Just as Jesus broke the bread there on the beach those fishing disciples, so he keeps giving himself to us, dispensing life to us, so that we can be truly alive, and truly a means through which others are drawn to him and experience his muchness, his abundant life.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Enough Is Enough." Article posted at Life.remixed blog. <https://mattanslow.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/enough-is-enough/> (April 14, 2021).

² Brueggemann, "Enough Is Enough."