

Third Sunday of Easter
April 14, 2013
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“STRANGER THAN FICTION”

John 21: 1-14

Today we have three wonderful images. In the Acts reading we have Paul, who, having encountered the risen Christ on the Damascus road, becomes blind. In the gospel lesson we have Peter who also encounters the risen Christ, but in his case must face three counts of betrayal of his Master. In Revelation, we have the awesome aspect of “myriads and myriads and thousands of thousands of elders.” Imagine trying to agree on anything at *that* Session meeting!

Of the three, I couldn’t resist Peter’s story, simply because of its amazing weirdness.

First of all, the story is familiar in an unsettling way. I think you know the feeling—you’re in the middle of a sentence and suddenly it feels like you’ve had the exact conversation before. You’ve said these same words in just this order and you already know what the other person will say back to you. Or you stand in a room or on a certain street, a place you’re sure you’ve never been before, yet somehow you know where everything is... the strange setting is somehow familiar though you cannot explain why. *Déjà vu*.

Listening to the 21st chapter of John has something of that same sensation. The time is after the resurrection; the disciples have seen Jesus alive, risen from the dead. But here the resurrected Jesus appears before the disciples as if for the first time. Here’s the scene:

Peter and some of the disciples decide to go fishing. They fished all night but caught nothing. This story -- the all-night vigil in the fishing boat with nothing to show for it -- might sound familiar. Luke places it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, when he is calling the disciples. It’s the “I will make you fishers of people” story.

In John’s gospel the story seems to have a different purpose. The fish do not represent an evangelical challenge, but rather a call to ministry.

Jesus, appearing on the beach, asks the disciples, “Children, have you any fish?” They answered him, “No.” Jesus said to them... (and we already know what he is about to say to them without hearing!) “Cast your net on the other side of the boat, and you will find some.”

And of course the catch is so great that the disciples cannot haul it in. *Déjà vu*. A story about following, after years of following. Then Jesus asks Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Well, we’ve heard this before, too. Years ago, Peter left his fishing nets to follow Jesus. And now Jesus seems to be calling him all over again. After three years of following. After confession and denial. After a decision had been made, Jesus asks beginner’s questions all over again.

I find this story a little eerie. Certain parts just don’t seem to fit, or there are curious facts thrown in for unknown reasons. Have you ever wondered, for example, why Peter was fishing naked? Or, given that he *was* naked, why he would have put clothes *on*

before jumping into the water? Or why Jesus called the disciples “children” when he never called them that before? Or why Jesus got the disciples to catch more fish, when he apparently already had some cooking on the shore? And then why were the fish they caught carefully counted, and the number recorded for posterity? Why 153 fish? And why didn’t the disciples recognize the risen Jesus? This was his *third* resurrection appearance to them recorded in John’s gospel! It’s a little weird. Almost “X-File” weird.

Maybe you remember the old TV series where two FBI agents investigate cases involving paranormal or unexplained phenomena? If Agents Mulder and Scully were to take their work to first-century Galilee, they would encounter a number of occurrences that could be classified as “X-Files.” In this chapter of John’s gospel alone, the resurrected Jesus is involved in several odd happenings: He returns from the dead; he stands unrecognized in front of his closest friends; he causes 153 large fish to rush suddenly into the disciples’ net; he engages in a mysterious dialogue with Peter. Some of these occurrences would clearly qualify as “paranormal”—outside the range of normal experience or scientifically explainable phenomena.

The producers of the show would love the fact that Jesus’ title “Christ” has been abbreviated as “X” since ancient times. This because “Christ” begins with the Greek letter “chi” (“X” to us.)

So picture if you will, a new episode of the “X Files.” Scully and Mulder usually spend their time probing evidence of alien visitors, genetically mutated serial killers, and unseen violent forces. This time they are beamed back in time, to the beach on the Sea of Galilee, on a certain morning where a mysterious figure has appeared, barbecuing fish on the beach.

Scully: “What are we doing here, Mulder?”

Mulder: “Something about fish, and some guy who reportedly has come back from the dead three times, appearing to his best friends, who, strangely, don’t seem to recognize him.”

Scully: “Christ, Mulder!”

Mulder: “Exactly, Scully.”

As the two work to solve this mysterious case, they encounter an increasing number of occurrences that defy scientific explanation. Agent Scully discovers that not everything fits her rational worldview, and she is led to probe ever deeper into the faith of her childhood. In other words, it’s pretty much like every week’s episode. You may remember that one episode ended with Scully actually asking the question, “What if God is speaking . . . and no one is listening?”

Weird event #1: Jesus Unrecognized

We struggle to see Jesus in times of exhaustion and confusion. Easter is over, the celebrations have passed, and now we are back on the job, working long hours to try to put food on the table. Although we are aware that Jesus is risen, we don’t know where in the world he is. He certainly doesn’t seem to be close to people like us, any more than he did to the disciples on the Sea of Galilee—hard-working men who might fish all night and yet catch absolutely nothing.

It is difficult to see Christ when we are burning with frustration. It is hard to sense his nearness when we are overwhelmed by anxiety, fear or grief. Our feelings can consume us and cut us off from the world around us, a world that is full of signs of the

presence of God. We just stare blankly over the sides of our isolated boats, like the exhausted and confused fishermen who cannot even recognize their closest friend Jesus waiting for them on the beach.

“Children, you have no fish, have you?” Jesus asks. They answer him, “No,” probably with irritation in their voices. If you have gone a week without sales, or a night without fish, you don’t want someone pointing out your failure to you.

Jesus draws back to their task, providing them with success beyond their highest hopes, but then, strangely, draws them away again. Almost as if he is saying to them, “Get your nose off the grindstone for a minute.”

Jesus calls the disciples to a Sabbath moment. He asks them to take a break. Not a bad idea for us, either. When we get so wrapped up in our own world we hardly even recognize our own family. How would we ever see Jesus? How would we ever notice the presence of God moving in our life? Jesus gets the disciples to focus on something other than themselves; to be concerned with something other than their own troubles. This is what allows them to recognize Jesus.

Weird event #2: 153 Fish

In my family, men are notorious for resisting guidance and direction. Question: Why did the Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years? Answer: Moses refused to ask for directions.

If this is true for most men in all ages in history, it is pretty likely that the disciples were not terribly receptive to the stranger on the beach who suggested, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some [fish].” “Yeah, sure,” they probably thought. “Who asked you to tell us how to fish?”

But the disciples do cast the net on the other side of the boat, and they are not able to haul it in because there are so many fish: 153 large fish, to be exact. This number is intriguing, and would probably inspire Agent Dana Scully to run a mathematical analysis on her computer. The theologian Augustine figured out that the number 153 is obtained when all of the integers from 1 to 17 are added together, a mathematical fact that suggests the completeness of the number 153 itself. Others have suggested that the number is a symbol of the Trinity, or a sign of the totality of the church—possibly because it is divisible only by the numbers three, and nine (which is three times three). 153 divided by nine gives us 17 again, and the integers 1, 5 and 3, when added together give us the number 9. Or – a Jewish solution – the 1910 Jewish Encyclopedia reports that a three-year Torah cycle was used in Palestine around the First Century. The cycle of Torah readings had 153 portions.¹

Okay, fun with math. Maybe this means something, maybe not. But, at the very least, it describes an enormous catch, pointing to the abundance of God’s gifts.

One mystery of the fish part of the story is that this miracle somehow enabled the disciples to recognize Jesus. Peter, with characteristic passion, leaps out of the boat and into the sea (after *uncharacteristically* stopping first to put his clothes on).

Weird event #3: The “re-calling” of Peter

Have you ever noticed that miracles tend to mean not *less* work for their beneficiaries, but more? This is definitely the case with Peter. After finishing a breakfast

¹ “Parashah,” Cyrus Adler, Lewis N Dembitz)

of bread and fish, Jesus asks Peter a question three times, a reminder of the three times that Peter denied Jesus on the night of his arrest and betrayal. Three separate times Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” and three times Peter says, “Yes, Lord.” Each of these questions and answers cancels out one of Peter’s shameful denials. In this way, Jesus gives Peter an opportunity to be redeemed, and receive forgiveness. At the same time, Jesus *calls Peter to ministry* all over again. It is as if Jesus were saying, “If I had it to do all over again, Peter, I would still choose you.”

But Peter is not just chosen again, he is newly commissioned. He is commanded to feed and care for God’s sheep. Peter is not forgiven simply so that he can feel good about himself again, but so that he can serve the church with “energy, intelligence, imagination and love.”² The miracle of forgiveness certainly makes more work for Peter, but it is the work that makes his life worth living.

The same is true for us: We are freed from the failures of our past, so that we will be free to live and serve. If we truly love the Lord who gives us forgiveness, we, like Peter, will look for ways in which we might tend his sheep and feed his lambs. If you’re not sure what this means, we welcome you to sit in on our next Mission Committee meeting. There are an infinite number of ways.

The crucial thing is to translate love and gratitude into action: to do what we can to care for the sheep that our Lord has left us. Recognizing Jesus, receiving his miraculous nourishment, and serving others in his name are steps we are called to take if we, with Peter, are committed to be followers of our resurrected Lord.

Agent Dana Scully asked, “What if God is speaking, and no one is listening?”

Maybe the question we should be prepared to answer is: “What if Christ is calling, and no one is following?”

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.

² A phrase used in the ordination of elders, deacons and ministers of the word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)