

In the Shoes of the Fisherman
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: John 21: 9 – 14 (NRSV)

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Easter Sunday presents a conundrum to me. It always has because I have never believed in the physical resurrection of the body. That, of course, became the popular understanding of the resurrection somewhere around the second century of the Common Era. That is not a Jewish belief nor one that the early Paul subscribed to. If there is life after death I have not the slightest idea of what that means and certainly do not have the means to describe it. Trust me when I tell you that I have lost more than one parishioner over the question, especially those of a fundamentalist or literalist persuasion. I certainly agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson that Christianity has taken a macabre interest in the human corpus, something akin to the Egyptian fascination with mummies and their tombs. A ministerial friend emailed me this week telling me how much he dreaded Easter Sunday. What is it that we are supposed to say without the monotonous repetition of “Where, O death is thy sting?” or the tiresome, “Hope springs eternal.”

And I have to tell you that my mood has not been enhanced by the news of the week. Nineteen-month-old Vincent Hill was murdered last weekend in North Newton. His mother was arrested later in the week with the announcement that the little boy's body indicated long-term physical abuse including the fact that his fingernails were pulled out. Death's sting is often deep and inflicted on the most innocent.

It is pretty evident to me that even the disciples of Jesus were not quite sure what to do with the resurrection story either. According to the Bible they had been in Jesus' company in the Upper Room and on the Road to Emmaus. From this reading of John's gospel we are given to understand that they have gone fishing. Now let me ask you a question. If you had been eyewitnesses to the physical resurrection of a human being who had been lashed, crucified, and pierced by a spear, dead and buried would you then decide to go fishing? Perhaps they were hungry and cast netting for fish is free. Maybe they needed to earn money to pay for rent and household expenses. Maybe they needed a few days off to think through all of these events, or just to get away from it all. When you are in stress go fishing. If the story took place in Scotland perhaps they would have gone golfing.

But it is also interesting in this story that Jesus had a pretty good idea where to find them and what they would be doing. He had called them originally from their fishing boats and recruited them as his followers. He found them again in their origins, doing what was most natural to them. Even more fascinating to me is the fact that he was waiting for them on the beach. A hot charcoal fire was burning. Fish were being cooked and bread warmed.

How does Jesus spend Easter? Think not that I am being factitious, but Jesus hosts a fish fry. He does not spend the Easter weekend trying to answer metaphysical questions. Jesus is not speculating about the afterlife or what happens to the body after death. Jesus puts on the apron, grills the fish, and breaks bread for his friends.

So what is the meaning of Easter? Easter is the time when we gather as the friends of the Fisherman. Easter is the time that follows the loss of life by death, or divorce, or disease, or betrayal with a gathering of our friends and a shared meal.

Think about it. Easter is as common as the reception after the memorial service. Easter is as normal as the casseroles, cakes, fried chicken, bread, salads, and fruits that people drop by the house when someone dies or there is a horrible accident in the family. Easter is the gathering of the family around the kitchen table and wonder, "What will we do with all of this food?"

I love the old story of the Amish family. Grandfather was in the bedroom. According to the doctor his death was imminent, even though he lingered. As he was wasting away Grandmother was baking a shoofly pie. Grandfather could smell it. He motioned to one of his sons. "Go downstairs and ask mother if I could have a piece of that pie."

The son did as his father asked. A few minutes later he was back in the bedroom. "I'm sorry, Grandfather, but Grandmother says the pie is for after the funeral."

If you were to read the next paragraph from John's story you would hear Jesus ask Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter insists that he loves the Lord. Jesus says to him, "Feed my sheep."

If Easter means anything it means following in the sandals of the Fisherman down to the beach and cooking breakfast for the fishers. Easter means breaking bread with the hungry ones and telling stories of life and love. Easter means feeding the sheep, even when they show up at the wrong times, in the wrong places, and for the wrong reasons.

There is no greater testimony of the power of life over death than fried catfish and cornbread. And if you think I am being shallow ask yourself why most of us will go out to dinner with family or friends today. Ask why there will be a large spiraled hams or a leg of lamb on the table boards of our homes this evening. Why do people make a special effort to visit grandparents or ailing aunts and uncles this day? Why will we stop by the cemetery on the way home and leave flowers on the graves of loved ones?

We will do all of these things and more because there is a profound movement of God's grace in the simple gestures of bread and wine, cakes and coffees, savory meats and covered dishes. What Easter tells us is that these movements of God's spirit are gathered in the community of faith to feed the bodies and souls of the dispirited and hopeful, the hungry and the satisfied, the sorrowful and the joyful.

When the family of faith gathers together at the close of the memorial day or when the last comforting friend departs you are not likely to hear someone ask, "So, what do you think about reincarnation?" You are more likely to hear someone say, "Please pass the biscuits." You will worry less about where momma is spending eternity and worry more about whether poppa is eating. There is not a greater

defiance of death than the church covered dish dinner after the service. There is not a greater affirmation of life than breakfast on the beach.

With these images in your mind, I invite you to join with me in this service of Holy Communion.

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