

Now may I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Easter is my favorite time to preach. It's my purple patch in the year, and the reason is I love all these resurrection stories. They're great texts to preach from. Each gospel has their own stories. None of them share the same stories, but they all have a similar tone. There's a certain quirkiness to all of them.

I think it's because they're slightly odd and unusual that I enjoy preaching from them, and every year to go back and find something new in these unusual stories of the resurrection. They all seem to raise as many questions as they answer. This passage from the end of John's gospel, chapter 21, seems to me, as I looked at it this week, to raise three particular questions, or at least it did in my mind.

The first question is this. Why is this story included at all? I ask that because it comes at the end of chapter 20, and chapter 20 ends like this. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name."

Doesn't that feel like an ending? As if the writer was wrapping the book up? Then chapter 21, the gospel we heard read, begins like this, "After these things," almost as PS, as an afterthought. It reminds me of those office parties where you say farewell to someone. Do you remember those? And you know you have balloons and you have cake and you say goodbye to them, and it's always slightly odd if you run into them the next day, because you've kind of done all the emotion and what's there left to say?

Chapter 21's got maybe something like that. "After these things," he has another go, with another story. And it might be that it was added on, because it does feel slightly different and in the original Greek, the language is slightly different, so why is it added? Well no one really know for sure, so let me hazard a guess. I think the writer wanted

to add more weight to the reality of the resurrection. He wanted to beef up the story a bit, so that the readers would know that this story, this amazing story, it's true.

There's always been people who've doubted the resurrection. There were those at the time of the disciples who said, well, they'd simply had a vision. Behind their backs, they'd probably say they were hallucinating, but this passage is included to give further evidence of the risen Jesus, that he wasn't a vision or a hallucination, but a real embodied person.

I think it's a compelling story. It achieves that because it feels authentic. It doesn't feel like a made-up story. I say that mainly because of what Jesus says in the story. If you were making up a story of somebody being raised from the dead, coming back to life, would you have as a punchline, "come and have breakfast"? It's a rather downbeat, homely story. Of all the things that Jesus could have said, and all the things he must have said as they talked around the fire, why is that what's recorded?

What this story does show is that the resurrected Jesus was not some aloof transparent, floating figure, but someone who could make a fire and cook the disciples breakfast. They'd been fishing all night. They were hungry, and Jesus addresses their physical needs. This says something very important about our resurrection faith. Our resurrection faith is not about escaping from this world. It's not simply pie in the sky when you die, putting off for some future hope. Our resurrection faith is about taking this world seriously, about transforming this world. Working with God as we see that recreation into the new kingdom of God.

Faith may be spiritual, but that doesn't mean that it's not worked out in the day to day life in which we're all involved. The Easter resurrection faith speaks to that practical, physical side of life. It leads to a deeper engagement with this world. The resurrection is all about transformation. The taking up of this world into something new.

I'm going off a piece now, just by way of a little insert, that we just had a terrific formation class, and the speaker, Janine Brown gave a wonderful illustration of what I think I'm talking about here, this transformation. Jesus being embodied and taken up into something else. She did begin this little illustration with declaring her love for Barry Manilow, but we'll let that slide. What she liked about Barry Manilow was the predictive nature of his songs, that they would all go along, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, and then there'd be a key change to the final chorus, the finale. It's the same song, but in a different key.

I think she's right to say that's a very compelling image of the resurrection Jesus that we see in this story, in the other resurrection stories. It's life in a different key. There's something familiar about him, but then something different. This is life transformed. This is the hope of the resurrection, that God will act to take up the material of this world, to transform it into something new, to recreate just as in the beginning, he created, and what we see in these resurrection stories and in resurrected Jesus is a sign of hope, God's recreation that is underway and will come to one glorious fruition.

So my second question about the passage is this. Why is it so specific about the number of fish that are caught? 153. It's very clear about that. Those of you who like me had a number of turbulent teenage romances, will no doubt have been told many times, there are plenty of fish in the sea, but the zoologists in these biblical times, knew exactly, they thought, how many varieties of fish there were living in the seas and the oceans, and the number they'd worked out was 153.

There were 153 varieties of fish. So the number here is symbolic. This is one reading, but this seems the most likely to me. It's symbolic. It stands for inclusivity. Just as the disciples caught in their nets the number of all the fish that there were, so when they went out to be fishers of women and men, they were to catch all different types of people. Everybody was welcome. All were included, and just as their nets didn't break, so the church was

broad enough and big enough to include all God's people, all different types of people.

There's a great illustration of the variety of people that there are in the world embedded in this story. There's Peter, the wild and enthusiastic disciple, who for some reason jumps out of the boat, to get to the shore. Then there's John, the beloved disciple, a completely different disposition. We know from this and other stories, he had a quiet, introvert, reflective nature. It was he who first recognized Jesus, and he in his more measured approach, quietly got the boats ashore. John and Peter. Two very different types of people, both responded to Jesus in their own way, very different ways, but they're both very important disciples and examples for how we're to follow Jesus.

The final question I have about this passage and actually this won't be so clear to you, but in the bible I was using to prepare the sermon, there was a subtitle. Jesus and the miraculous catch of fish. Verse 5 says, "Jesus asked them have you caught anything?" No say the disciples. Well Jesus says, "Throw your nets onto the right side of the boat, and you'll find some." And they did.

Well there's no suggestion here of anything particularly miraculous. Yes it was a large number of fish, but that's how they fished in those days. You'd have a boat out on the shore and one of the number would be on the beach, and he'd be directing them where to put their nets because he could see where the water was ruffled, where the fish were. This is how they fished.

I think what's interesting here isn't so much of the miracle of the catch of fish, but what's really striking is it's a great picture of how the risen Jesus comes alongside the disciples. That's where the emphasis for us should be maybe. There's nothing particularly dramatic in this encounter. The most impressive feature is the gentle voice of the master guiding and caring for his disciples. I find this resonating with my own experience of encountering the risen Lord Jesus. I couldn't point to anything miraculous, any dramatic or blinding vision. But I'm familiar with that gentle, quiet,

prompting voice, the voice that told the disciples to cast their nets on the other side.

The disciples could have been so taken up with their frustration at not having caught anything, that they might not have heard this calling to them, but they did. They heard his voice. That's the challenge for us. Are we listening? Is our life so busy, so noisy, that we don't take time to be still, to pay attention to that voice that calls out to us, guiding us?

The risen Lord still draws alongside his disciples. He speaks by his Spirit and calls us. We must be ready to hear the voice that which so often gets lost in life's busyness and we should be prepared to respond. We might be a Peter kind of person, or we might be more restrained, like John. There's no right or wrong way of responding to Jesus, but the key is that we listen and we do respond, as the risen Jesus still calls to us his people.

Hallelujah, Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed!