



VILLAGE
CHURCH

Presbyterian (USA)

You Never Know Where He Might Appear

SCRIPTURE:
John 21:1-19

April 9, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

My friend, the Rev. Rebecca Messman, notices that the story begins in an understated manner... “after these things,” John says. “These things” includes both betrayal and denial by men whom Jesus loved. These things include the agony and intended humiliation of crucifixion. “These things” include the trek at dawn, the word from angels, and the one who was dead now lives, and from time to time, appears to those he loves.¹

These are the things through which God changes everything. It is after “these things” that Peter goes fishing. Almost, as if nothing has changed, Peter goes fishing? Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised. Because on the one hand we say the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. On the other hand, things seem very much the same. Jesus is raised, but Caesar still rules. The practice of crucifixion will continue because that is the way of the empire. It is true of our time as well.

Since we gathered last Easter, war continues to rage in Ukraine. Seemingly every day, storms and fires and floods destroy communities. To say that gun violence is a daily occurrence actually understates the reality. And many of you are keenly aware that the promise of this day is not abstract, for death has come and left your heart broken.

Jesus is the risen Lord, but his resurrection is a bit modest in impact in this world. The ways of Caesar remain strong. Perhaps that is why Peter goes fishing.

Peter seems out of practice because they catch nothing. That is until Jesus appears to them on the beach and tells them to cast their nets over there. They do and they catch a boatload. It’s only then that they realize it’s Jesus.

This isn’t the first time Jesus has appeared and you would think that his followers would be on the look-

out. But he seems to surprise them every time.

Each time he appears, his followers fail to recognize him right away. Mary sees him in the garden and thinks he is the gardener. It’s only when he calls her name that she recognizes him. And the travelers on the Emmaus Road talk with him all afternoon, but only when they sit down to eat do they know it’s Jesus. And here, they don’t know it’s the Christ until they catch a boatload of fish.

This is important—God’s work of resurrection happened in this world, which means the spirit of Christ shows up from time to time, and yet, even for those who knew him, it wasn’t always easy to spot. Sometimes we get distracted.

It says when they all came ashore, they counted the fish—they caught “153 fish.” This detail stumps Bible scholars. The risen Christ is appearing to his disciples; to know how many fish they caught doesn’t seem like an essential detail.

Through the ages the church has tried to figure out the meaning of 153 fish. St. Jerome, a theologian of the 4th century, surmised that there are 153 species of fish, so the great catch symbolized that the church would include all people. Turns out Jerome was wrong about the fish and the church.

St. Augustine took a mathematical approach. He noted that adding numbers 1-17 equals 153. And that 17 is ten plus seven, so this is obviously an allusion to the Ten Commandments and the seven Fruits of the Spirit.² Okay. If that’s what John was going for, he buried the meaning pretty deep.

My friend Agnes Norfleet, pastor of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in Philly, points out something more straightforward. Someone had to count those fish. It reminded her of David James Duncan’s novel, “The River Why.” In that novel, a young fly fisherman,

1 Becca shared this in a paper presented on this text to the Well (a preaching study group). It was written in 2013.

2 Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus* (2007) p. 144.

Gus Orviston, says, “Like gamblers and baseball fans... fishermen are enamored with statistics. ...even those rarified anglers, the disciples of Jesus, couldn’t resist backing their yarns with arithmetic.” Gus continues, “Consider the circumstances: Jesus is standing on the beach newly risen from the dead, and it is only the third time his disciples have seen him since the nightmare of Calvary.”³ And yet someone, maybe all of them, took time to count the fish.

Jesus has breakfast ready and they are... “14, 15, 16... just a minute, there are a lot of fish here... 53, 54, 55... I’ve never seen this many fish!” If missing the point had a defining moment, the moment you turn from the risen Christ to count fish might be it. I say that because I’m afraid I might be that guy.

The risen Christ is preparing breakfast and as he always did, he’ll teach us what we are for. And instead, I’d be over there... “Hey, guys, you won’t believe it! There are 153 fish here.”

We don’t need to know how many fish there are, but maybe John includes this detail as a warning, as a reminder, of how easy it is to completely miss the point of the day. How signs of resurrection can show up right in front of us and we miss them because we are distracted.

In 2009, Captain Chesley Sullenberger safely landed a plane in the Hudson River. You remember. Ric Elias was sitting in seat 1-D. Elias said as that plane sank from the sky, his mind was filled with thoughts of what he had done and hadn’t done. It made him sad. Sad about how often his priorities had gotten skewed. He had ranked people with less importance than they deserved. He was a businessman who, in his own words, too often thought business was more important than being a man. He said he was not afraid. He was sad because for so much of life, he hadn’t really paid attention to what matters.

I think that’s pretty common. I think for many of us we are less afraid of dying and more afraid that we won’t really live before we do.

Elias said, “I was given two miracles that day. The first was survival. The second was the gift to see into the future and to come back to live differently.”⁴

This is the impact of resurrection for you and me right now. Yes, it means that the love of God is stronger than death and when you die, God will hold on. Because God loves you, God simply refuses to grant death the power to pull you from God. But resurrection addresses a deeper, more current need. Jesus appears to his disciples on the beach to pull them from their distractions and show them what this day, and every day, is for.

That’s why he sits Peter down. “Do you love me?” “Of course, I love you,” Peter says. “Say it again,” Jesus says. “Say it one more time.” Jesus taught us that we exist to love God with all that we are and to love one another but that love needs to be rehearsed. It needs to be practiced. Jesus knows we need to rehearse it over and over and over again or we will be distracted and miss what we are for.

I visited Jennifer. She didn’t have long to live. She wanted to talk about what scriptures to read. About what hymns to sing. We talked about her life and she did so with gratitude and joy. But then she began to fatigue. Her illness was weighing heavy. I showed myself to the door as she drifted off to sleep in her chair.

But as I reached my car, I heard her call me. “Tom,” she said. I turned and was surprised to see her standing in the doorway. She was smiling a smile that could’ve given light to the sun. There was no way in that moment to know that she was only a few hours from death. She said, “Tom, I love you. Did I tell you I love you?” “I love you, too,” I said.

I had taken a lot of notes on scriptures, hymns and stories to tell and that was all important. But nothing was more important than that moment at the door. Death was coming. And death gets one moment. The promise of God is that when we breathe our last, God will ensure that death just gets that one moment and then we will be with God.

But the call of resurrection is to not surrender to the powers of death any moments ahead of time. The call of resurrection is to live and we do that when we love. “I love you,” she said. “I love you, too.”

Jesus said, “Say it again.” Love needs to be rehearsed. And when we do, Jesus himself is right there.

³ I’m grateful to Rev. Agnes Norfleet who shared this insight as well as the quotations from “The River Why” in her Moveable Feast Paper on this text presented in 2007.

⁴ “Three Things I Learned While My Plane Crashed.” TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, filmed March 2011, posted April 2011.

“Peter, do you love me?” “Of course I do.” “Say it again,” Jesus says. You understand this rehearsal is not for Jesus. It isn’t Jesus who needs to hear it. It’s Peter who needs to say it. Because when we share the love that is ours to share, that is when we see resurrection in this beautiful but broken world.

Dr. Tom Long taught at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey. Tom sat down next to a man in the Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton. It was a church supper and they began to chat. “You new to Nassau?” “No,” he said, “I’ve been going here all my life.” “That right?” Tom responded. “Yeah, I’m the last nonintellectual left in this church.” “No,” Tom said. “It’s true. I haven’t understood a sermon in this church in 25 years.” “Really? But you’re still here!” “I’d never leave,” the man said. “Dr. Long, every

Monday night, a group of us go to the boys’ detention center. We play, sometimes pray. We tell them that the worst thing in their lives doesn’t define them. I’ve come to love those boys and I want them to know it. Dr. Long, I don’t see Jesus often, but when I do, it’s mostly on Monday nights with those boys.”

I don’t know what’s going to happen between now and next Easter, but I imagine some pain and brokenness and grief will be part of the year to come. And all those things can distract us from what matters most. That’s why we rehearse.

Speak love again and again and again. Share love again and again and again. When you do, you never know where the risen Christ might appear next. But he will.