

# Third Sunday of Easter

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## Introduction

This is an unusual chapter of John's Gospel which seem to pick up some of the familiar story arcs of the rest of the book. It is a curiously downbeat ending which sees traumatised and confused disciples try to establish some form of order in their lives after the violent events of Holy Week and the staggering reappearance of Jesus. There is also the dramatic reinstatement of Peter who had previously denied Jesus.

The challenge of the chapter is to believe that damaging violence and trauma need not signal the end of purposeful living.

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## Text

### John 21:1–19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

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 and 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.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

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## Comment

Many experts argue that John's gospel closes at the end of chapter 20, finishing with Thomas's great declaration of faith in v28 and then the famous summary statement of the writer to the effect that Jesus did lots of other things which were not recorded, but these have been carefully selected to lead you to faith and life (John 20:30,31). This makes tremendous literary sense, and it's a suitably dramatic moment on which to conclude. But instead we have this curious additional chapter.

It is a complex chapter which appears to return to many of the story threads from the rest of the gospel. There is a very strong link to the feeding of the five thousand in chapter 6 for instance.

The lake has a prominent place to play; both stories are told after having crossed it or, as here, right beside it. There is a food related question to open each account (John 6:5 and 21:5). There is the miraculous multiplication of bread and fish in chapter 6 and the miraculous catch of fish in chapter 21. The distribution of the food is done in strangely similar ways and both seem to reflect the events of the Last Supper (John 6:11 and 21:13). And Jesus asks questions in both stories to which he already appears to know the answer (John 6:6 and 21:13).

There is even the repetition of the same phrase, "and he did the same with the fish," (John 6:11 and 21:17).

In both settings circumstances of great absence end with huge abundance.

The John 6 miracle appears to be a theological presentation of Jesus as the new Moses, providing life-sustaining food even in wilderness settings. This miracle story happens, according to John, at an early stage in his ministry. Here in John 21 though, things are radically different.

The horrific events of Holy Week and the strange, intermittent post-resurrection appearances have surely confused Jesus' followers. Yet we have a restatement of Jesus as the new Moses, whose mission even the horrific violence of Good Friday and the barren emptiness of Holy Saturday could not undo.

Nor is the Gospel finished with so-called Doubting Thomas. His reappearance in John 21, along with certain other disciples comes after the statement of belief in John 20:28, yet his return to the narrative is often portrayed as a loss of faith on the part of the disciples. On the surface it seems they leave the way of discipleship and return to their old lives as fishermen. But I'm not so sure. There were some things that just had to be done. Hungry people needed to be fed, and there was work to be done while waiting for the appearance of the Resurrected One.

This can be the hardest thing to come to terms with after some traumatic event, the fact that life must go on. Old patterns must be picked up again if only to put in place some framework after everything has been dismantled. This return to fishing could therefore be considered a tremendous act of courage.

It is often the case that repetition of familiar rituals helps restore some shape to the disorder of confused minds, and this is one reason why liturgy can be such a comfort when chaos disrupts the established order of life.

Jesus is thus found or recognised in the midst of the everyday.

This is a consistent pattern in the bible. In Exodus 16 in the promise of manna in the desert God tells Moses that every morning and evening they will be fed and in this they will see the Glory of the Lord. The two who walked with Jesus to Emmaus didn't recognise him until the simple breaking of bread and then their eyes were opened. The abundant catch of fish came out of that dark and seemingly empty lake.

In obedience to Jesus command they simply learned to look differently at what they were doing, to cast their net from a different side of the boat and the waters they had previously thought barren were shown to be teeming with life and sustenance. It was then that they recognised the Lord. Jesus blesses in the midst of the everyday, the boring and repetitive, in the aftermath of trauma and tragedy, in the apparently fruitless work done in obedience to his call.

Finally, it's worth noticing who is specifically named among these returning fishermen. Three are named, Simon Peter, Thomas and Nathanael (who was probably not one of the Twelve). Wes Howard-Brook writes, "The Johannine disciples who are named share a common trait. They have each revealed their doubts about their relationship with Jesus: Peter, by his denial; Thomas, by his demand for physical proof; and Nathanael, by his doubt that "good" could come out of Nazareth. At the same time, each has also offered an explicit confession of faith: Peter, of Jesus as the "Holy One of God" (6:69); Thomas, "My Lord and my God" (20:28), and Nathanael, you are the Son of God, the King of Israel" (1:49). Finally, each has had his "confession" followed by a rhetorical question by Jesus that expressed his own doubts about the depth of the disciples' commitment (6:70; 20:29; 1:50)." (p. 468)

I suspect many among us find ourselves in good company with these three fragile, tentative followers of Jesus; we are capable of both believing and doubting and often at the same time. We may even harbour suspicion that Jesus has concerns about us!

This chapter however stages a glorious recapitulation of Peter's earlier denial around the charcoal fire in the High Priest's courtyard (John 18:15-26). It presents a possible way towards the restoration of relationships following a betrayal.

Once again there are three questions asked of Peter and in the first two Peter is unable to rise to the level of commitment required. Jesus asks Peter twice “Do you love (*agape*) me? And Peter replies with the word *phileis*. In Greek *agapas* is unconditional love, and *phileis* is a form of brotherly love.

Significantly though, in the third question Jesus uses the word *phileis*. Rather than heaping shame and guilt on Peter at such a fraught time Jesus steps down to him, as if to say, “that’s ok then Peter, we can start there!”

That Jesus was prepared to forgive after such a terrible abandonment I find remarkable. That he was willing to reinstate their friendship and to do it at a pace set by the one who abandoned him I find astonishing. But such is the nature of the Jesus way.

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## Response

Many of us who have suffered abandonment or betrayal at the hands of one we considered a friend, can find forgiveness and restoration difficult. Sometimes trauma is deepened by well-meaning others who seem to demand of us that we forgive and reconcile.

We can practice through forms of ritual, just like the disciples did in their return to fishing. We can practice restoring difficult relationships or saying goodbye to grievances by writing a prayer or a psalm of lament into which we can pour our hurt and anger and desire for revenge. Even the practice of decluttering done with intention, can ritualise letting go of feelings no longer healthy for us.

Over time these internal practices can prepare us for the external act of forgiveness.

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## Prayer

Risen Christ,

Provider of breakfast  
after the fruitless struggles of night

Restorer of purpose  
after the agonising loss of hope

Renewer of confidence  
after the burning humiliation of denial

Appear again as you did once before  
to those disappointed disciples  
by the shores of Lake Tiberias.

Allow me recognise you again  
in your quiet words of invitation  
“Come and eat.”

Know that I love you  
(though probably not as much as I should).

And let me hear again your gentle call,  
“Follow me!”

Amen