

# Third Sunday of Easter

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## Introduction

When you have suffered a bereavement or trauma, it can feel as though the rug has been pulled from under your feet. The laws of physics still exist and the world keeps on revolving, but the axis upon which your life turns is missing. There is a sense of being lost or inadequate in the face of life's daily challenges. It is draining to process the conflict between life as it was supposed to be and life as it is now.

In this week's reading, we join the disciples as they continue to come to terms with the shocking events of Easter and their new reality. The Messiah they had followed had died and risen again, but once more they were without him. They had left their ordinary lives to follow the extraordinary Jesus. They had travelled many miles with him, encountered innumerable challenges with him, spoken up for him, and then watched him die, their dreams of a radically altered world dying with him. Deep in grief, they were questioning everything they had believed. In the locked room in Jerusalem, they had conflicting coping mechanisms: silence and noise, action and inaction, denial and anguish. Afterwards, when they thought of Jesus appearing to them in that locked room, they could not decide if it was real, or the product of their hopeful imaginations. He had left them again and the tumult they felt inside was greater than that of the storm Jesus had calmed. Why could he not stay with them? What were they to do now? How could life go back to any kind of normal? What was normal anyway? What was real?

As you read what happened next, imagine the thoughts and emotions of the disciples as they attempt to go through the motions. Do you notice anything strange about their behaviour? What are their coping mechanisms?

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## Text

John 21: 1-14

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.

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## Comment

For many people, the greatest conflict they will experience is within their own minds. As a self-confessed perfectionist and overthinker, this is familiar to me. However, I must acknowledge that I am reading this text through the lens of my experience of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) following the birth of my son. My wee boy was born in a place that was not home and he had to stay in hospital there for six weeks following major surgery. In the midst of the trauma itself, I operated on survival mode. He was my focus, the axis around which my world turned, and rightly so. I had no time to deal properly with my thoughts and emotions, as I focused on ensuring he had the right care. When we got him home, our 'new normal' included lots of hospital appointments along with cuddles, giggles and piles of nappies.

When I returned to work after my maternity leave, I thought I could ease myself back into a routine that had been familiar. Instead, I was plunged into a world I did not recognise and a working environment that had shifted away entirely from that which we had all known. COVID had arrived in the UK and the first lockdown had begun. When I got symptoms and had to isolate, I had all the time in the world to be inside my head, and could not escape my inner conflicts, grief and fear. I was grieving the pregnancy, birth and maternity leave experiences that I had hoped for, whilst at the same time, treasuring the experiences I had because they were mine. It took an incredible amount of support and hard work to put the pieces of me back together again. For a long time, the world was unrecognisable to me. Daily routines that I had previously performed without thinking were suddenly a struggle. My resilience was at an all-time low. Everything was in flux and I began to question things I knew to be true.

In this text, I see the disciples doing the same. They have seen Jesus alive, some of them twice, but they are so traumatised by all they have been through that they have trouble accepting it as truth. They had been so sure that he was the Messiah and his death had made them doubt themselves. Having locked themselves away for protection, they had time and space to contemplate their experiences and to wallow in their grief, disappointment, doubt and pain. Every disciple would have dealt with these emotions differently. The time came when some of the disciples found the room too claustrophobic and needed to get out. They travelled to the Sea of Tiberius.

We join them there with all their emotional baggage. They go fishing together. Did they simply jump at the chance to do something or to get away? Perhaps they were scared to be apart, or realised that they needed each other. They were relying on one other to set a course, to get them through. This is familiar to me. I wonder how it might relate to your experience of living with COVID restrictions.

Despite having fished all night, they had caught nothing. This was not unusual, but the disappointment was real. I wonder if it caused them to doubt themselves again. The inner conflict between living in the past and the present, the world as it is and the world as you had hoped it would be, can be disorientating. During this time when they are feeling vulnerable, a stranger calls out from the beach to suggest that they fish on the other side. Would they have accepted this advice from someone they did not know under normal circumstances? I wonder whether they welcomed someone telling them what to do at a time when they had lost all sense of direction and purpose.

When they notice that their haul is much greater than they could have expected, the realisation dawns that this is no stranger. In response, Peter does the strangest thing. Even in his desperation to get to Jesus first, he takes time to get dressed, to cover his nakedness before jumping into the water. Surely it would have been easier to swim naked and get dressed on the shore. Reminiscent of Adam and Eve, Peter recognises his vulnerability and covers it up. Is this simply a matter of clothing himself, or is it rather a physical manifestation of setting aside his doubts, fears, and inner conflict? Are his clothes like a mask to hide his human weakness?

When Peter reaches Jesus on the shore, there is bread, and fish cooking on the fire. In that place of vulnerability, Jesus addresses both their physical and spiritual needs. He meets them on the beach to assure them that he has risen and will continue to be with them through the challenges to come. The catch of fish was immaterial. What was important was the fishing trip, the experience of being together even as they endured their inner conflicts, the journey itself. Their weakness had been exposed out in the elements. In this shared experience, they were both reacting to their trauma and addressing their healing together.

This text is rich with confusion and strange responses and a group of people trying to process their traumatic experiences. They are trying to reconcile themselves to a life they were not expecting and orient themselves in a world they do not understand. They are trying to find their place and identity, even as they doubt themselves. I wonder if our understanding of PTSD today might help us get into the minds and experience of those disciples. If we can, how does that help us in our life experiences?

Let's be real. The inner narrative of our minds can be exhausting, especially when we are in conflict. It can be particularly challenging to deal with a reality for which we did not plan. That may be living with grief, childlessness, change of career, singleness, divorce, abuse, or trauma of any kind. It brings up all sorts of questions. Do we try to dress up or hide away our weakness? How do we move past the idea that seeking help is acknowledgement of failure or weakness? In the disciples' experience in the locked room, in the fishing boat and on the shore, we see them tackling their inner conflicts individually, in company and with Christ. Perhaps in our own experiences of conflict and trauma, we could benefit from their process and their story.

For my recovery, I needed professional support to encourage more positive thinking, time for personal reflection, and time in company so that I didn't lock myself away. Only then was I able to recognise the wave of prayer that had held me when I could not pray for myself. Jesus was with me throughout the tumult and when I found myself, I found him too. He never left me. Whatever you are going through, may you have glimpses of Jesus right there with you too.

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## Response

Think of the ways in which you 'dress' to cover your vulnerabilities. What masks do you wear? Challenge whether you really need to wear them.

In the locked room, in the boat, on the shore – what would be your coping mechanism in each of these situations?

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## Prayer

God who is with us  
in the locked room, in the empty nets, in our inner conflicts,  
help us to embrace our vulnerabilities, we pray.  
May we allow ourselves to be naked with you,  
all our weaknesses and flaws laid bare before our Maker,  
the One who knows and loves us best of all.  
Be our strength and our guide,  
as we determine how to place one foot in front of the other.  
Provide us with what we need for the journey:  
for our bodies, minds and spirits,  
and grant us the right companions  
to accompany us on the road.  
Amen.