

Easter Sunday
Breakfast on the Beach

John 21:1-25

Is seeing believing?
Is what you see what you get?
Are there none so blind –
As those who will not see?

You've just heard the testimonies of several who can say, "Once I was blind, but now I see."

The Apostle John, the one who entered the empty tomb and saw and believed wrote this:

But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.
— John 20:31 NLT

It's interesting that, immediately after those words, John launches back into another account of Jesus' appearance to his disciples. It's found in John chapter 21. And I've entitled it "Breakfast on the Beach."

Later Jesus appeared again to the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. This is how it happened. Several of the disciples were there—Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples.

Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing."

"We'll come, too," they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night.

— John 21:1-3 NLT

The scene takes place by the Sea of Galilee. The disciples of Jesus have come here because Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection: "Go and tell my disciples that I'm going ahead of them into Galilee. It's there that I'll appear to them."

The Bible says that Jesus appeared to more than 500 people following his resurrection. Think of it – 515 people! That's a lot of witnesses! Let's put that in context. Think about it this way: if we were holding a trial to determine the facts concerning the resurrection, and if we were to call to the witness stand every eyewitness who personally encountered the resurrected Jesus and we cross-examined each of them for only 15 minutes, and if we went around the clock without a break, how long do you think we'd be sitting here? This first-hand, eyewitness testimony would continue through today and tonight, through all day Monday and Monday night, through all day Tuesday and Tuesday night, through all day Wednesday and Wednesday night, through all day Thursday – and we'd be listening to the last eyewitness account sometime late evening next Friday! After listening more than 128 straight hours, who could possibly walk away unconvinced? I've never heard of a case anywhere with nearly as much eyewitness testimony as that!

But maybe these encounters with the resurrected Jesus were nothing but an hallucination. They wanted so bad to see Jesus alive and they believed that he would come back, so they all had an hallucination and just *thought* they saw Jesus. And yet psychologists tell us this really isn't likely for two reasons. First, you hallucinate about that which you're anticipating. But the disciples really weren't anticipating the resurrection. They were rather confused and disillusioned. Furthermore, hallucinations are like dreams – they're individual events that can't be shared between people. It would be like me asking you, "*Did you enjoy my dream last night?*" In fact, for 500 people to have the same hallucination would be a bigger miracle than the resurrection. Friends, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is not mythology or an hallucination. It is rather a real event of history that revolutionized the lives of those who encountered him.

Jesus had already appeared twice before to a group of the disciples. But in the excitement, they're still trying to put all the pieces together. Maybe that's why Peter says, "I'm going fishing." Let's just get some down time, hang out doing what we used to do, and calm down a bit.

The disciples had been fishing all night long. Of course, then as now, fishing often took place at night. The fisherman would use torches to attract the fish to the boat where they would net them. But on this particular night they were not so successful. In spite of the fact that these men were accomplished fishermen, they knew where to fish, when to fish and how deep to fish...they caught nothing!

But failure was not such a bad thing for these disciples. *It is often in times of discouragement and failure that the risen Jesus manifests himself to us.* For it was in their failure, that they saw God's faithfulness. Really, this whole story is about our failure and God's faithfulness. The disciples fail at fishing and then later Peter is reminded of his failure at following. But both times, God reveals himself in love and forgiveness.

It is often our successes that get in the way of God. We begin to think that we are "self-made people." And who do self-made people worship! Their own creator! But when our own self-effort is exhausted and we come up empty, it's then that God can work miracles.

At dawn Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn't see who he was. He called out, "Fellows, have you caught any fish?"

"No," they replied.

Then he said, "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get some!"

So they did, and they couldn't haul in the net because there were so many fish in it.

— John 21:4-6 NLT

While the disciples are on the sea, Jesus is on the shore. At dawn, it "dawned" on the disciples that someone was "standing on the beach." Isn't that how it often is in our lives? Like the disciples, we're struggling to make life work. We're bummed because life doesn't work. And all the while Jesus is just standing there...waiting for us to recognize his presence.

And just like the disciples, we often – at the first recognition that maybe God is there – don't really recognize who He is. "They couldn't see who he was," the text reads. So Jesus asks a question to help the disciples "get the point." "Friends, have you caught any fish?"

"Friends," Jesus says. Not "traitors," or "turncoats" but "friends." "Have you caught any fish?" Of course, Jesus knew the answer, even from a hundred yards away. He knows, too, what's going on in your life. He knows the difficult, unbelievable, unbearable circumstances of your life. He sees to the very heart of it all. But he still calls you his "friend."

The problem is, however, that so often we don't realize our own need. And that's why Jesus asks the question to which he already knows the answer. Before Jesus meets our need we must become fully aware of our need...painfully conscious of it.

So Jesus tells them, "Throw your net on the other side and you'll get quite a catch." Now that's a novel plan. These experienced fishermen have fished all night, and then a man on the beach a hundred yards away tells them to fish on the other side of the boat! I have no doubt that Jesus directed those fish to be there. "And fish, unlike me, obey their Lord!"¹ When the disciples obey, they catch so many fish that they can't haul them in!

Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (for he had stripped for work), jumped into the water, and headed to shore. The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore, for they were only about a hundred yards from shore.

— John 21:7-8 NLT

Seeing the miracle, John immediately recognizes the identity of the one standing on the beach. "It's the Lord," he tells the others. John is always the more insightful one, while Peter is the more impetuous one. Throwing on his outer clothes, he jumps into the water and swims the 100 yards to where Jesus is, leaving the other disciples the task of pulling the boat and fish to the shore.

When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread.

"Bring some of the fish you've just caught," Jesus said. So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn't torn.

"Now come and have some breakfast!" Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead.

— John 21:9-14 NLT

That's a lot of fish! Since there are only seven disciples here and then Jesus, that makes nearly 20 fish per person...not counting the fish Jesus had already prepared on the beach. You couldn't get a better deal than that, even at Newport Bay!

“Now come and have some breakfast!” Jesus said. I don’t know a better picture of intimate fellowship than this. In the Jewish world, as today, close communion and fellowship often takes place around food. Jesus was often accused during his ministry of *eating* with sinners. Why? Because in the mind of the traditional Hebrew, to eat with someone implied communion and fellowship with that person.

The same risen Jesus who says on the beach, “Come and have some breakfast!” later says from heaven, “Look, I am standing at the door and I’m knocking. If any man will open the door, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). The risen Jesus invites these disciples – and you and me – not just to some fish and bread on the beach, but more importantly to intimate relationship with himself.

Notice that none of the disciples dare ask, “Who are you?” For now they know who it is. It is the Lord. They have now moved from not being able to see who was standing on the beach to a full recognition of Christ’s person. What about you? Where are you in that journey of faith toward the risen Jesus? Can you say as John did, “It is the Lord!”

After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know I love you.”

“Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him.

Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.”

“Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said.

A third time he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep.”

— John 21:15-17 NLT

We move here from revelation to response. Jesus has revealed himself to his disciples and they now recognize him for who he is. But the question now is: How will they respond...especially Peter? Will they follow Jesus? Will you follow Jesus?

What is so interesting about what takes place here in the dialogue between Jesus and Peter are the parallels with the account of Peter’s previous denial of Jesus. Remember that night of Jesus’ arrest? Peter was hanging out in the courtyard of the high priest. There around a charcoal fire, like the one Jesus had made here to fry the fish, Peter denied he even knew the Lord. Here – again around a charcoal fire – he confesses to love the Lord.

In the courtyard Peter is referred to as Simon Peter and here on the beach he is called Simon Peter. Simon is his natural name, the name that speaks of who he is apart from Jesus. It speaks of the “Simon” that is in each of us. But Jesus gave Simon a new name, Peter, meaning the “rock.” Earlier, Jesus had told Peter, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your

brothers” (Luke 22:31-32). Rather paradoxically, the “strong man,” now made weak is able to strengthen his brothers!ⁱⁱ

But the most striking parallel is this. In both the courtyard and on the beach, there is a three-fold statement. On the eve of Jesus’ crucifixion, Peter denies the Lord three times. Here on the beach, he confesses his love for the Lord three times.

“Simon son of John, do you *love* me more than these?” Jesus asks. But who are the ‘these’? I don’t believe that Jesus is referring to the fishing gear, even though Peter loved to fish. And I don’t believe Jesus is referring to the fish themselves. Even though I’m sure Peter was appreciative of the delicious meal Jesus had just prepared. No, Jesus is asking, “Do you love me more than *these other disciples*?” That makes sense. Before Peter denied Jesus, he had boasted self-confidently, “Everybody is going to forsake you, Lord, but I will lay down my life for you!” Open mouth, insert foot...that’s Peter’s personal style. Brash, self-confident, speaking before thinking, somewhat arrogant and proud. And so Jesus has to remind him, “Peter, do you really love me more than these other disciples?”

Peter’s response is telling. “Lord, you know I love you...” leaving off the words, “more than these.” Maybe Peter has come to view himself more humbly. Enough of the bold comparisons and extravagant claims! He now defines himself strictly in terms of Jesus’ knowledge of who he is.

What is disturbing for Peter, however, is that Jesus repeats the question: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” After Peter’s affirmative response, again Jesus asks: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

But now Peter was hurt. He probably recognizes the three-fold reminder of his previous denial. The agony and guilt of that horrific night comes flooding into his memory. In such stark contrast to his previous overly ambitious claim to follow Jesus at any cost (and even if no one else did!), Peter is now confronted head on by his own inadequacy.

What makes the dialogue even more penetrating is the choice of words. Though some think that the word choice is simply stylistic, I tend to disagree. In the first two questions, Jesus asks Peter, “Peter, do you *love* me?”...using the word *agapao*, meaning a selfless love that is a decision of the will to commit to another person for their benefit. It is selfless love.

But each time, Peter replies, “Lord, you know that I *love* you.” Peter chooses the word, *phileo*, the word for affectionate love, the love we naturally feel. Why did Peter do this? I believe it’s because Peter was not so self-confident any more. He was through with bragging of his great love and commitment. He was now better able to look at himself as he really was.

But in the last question, Jesus condescends to Peter’s choice of words, “OK, Peter, do you *love* me...?” using the word for affectionate, brotherly love. Again, Jesus meets Peter where he is. And he will do the same for you and me. The bottom-line criteria for God working in our lives is not our love for him but his love for us. The apostle Paul says, “Christ’s love constrains me.” It is not your weak, faltering love for him, but his sufficient, never-ending love for you that can break through and make the difference in your life.

The point is this: Don't wait until you've got your act together to come to the risen Jesus. Maybe you feel a lot like Peter. Maybe you've even outright denied Jesus in the past, either in your words or in your choices. Jesus stands as much ready to reinstate you and he stood ready to reinstate Peter! Why? Because our God is the God of second chances. That's why Jesus tells Peter here, "Feed my lambs," "Take care of my sheep," and a third time, "Feed my sheep." God will not only forgive you, but He will fill you and work through you in touching the lives of others.

The road of discipleship will probably not be an easy road, however. Notice what Jesus tells Peter in the following verses:

"I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go." Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me."

— John 21:18-19 NLT

Eusebius, the church historian, tells us that when Peter went to Rome at the close of his life, he was imprisoned. Then his hands were bound and he was led to the place of execution. There he was crucified during the reign of Nero. At his own request, he was crucified head down, not considering himself worthy to be crucified in the same way as his Lord Jesus was.

By the way, I know of no better proof of the veracity of Christianity and of the resurrection than the martyrdom of the early disciples. People die for all kinds of things. Sometimes they even die for a lie. Just look at what happened on 9/11. Many people have died for their faith (and not necessarily the Christian faith) down through the centuries. But here's the difference. People will die for their religious beliefs if they're convinced their beliefs are true, such as the terrorists around the world. But people will *not* die for their religious beliefs if they *know* they are false. And the disciples were in a position to know first-hand whether Jesus had really risen from the dead. If they had been lying, would they have allowed themselves to be tortured for something they knew was false? But because it was true, they were willing to die for it.

Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, "Lord, who will betray you?" Peter asked Jesus, "What about him, Lord?"

Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me." So the rumor spread among the community of believers that this disciple wouldn't die. But that isn't what Jesus said at all. He only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"

— John 21:20-23 NLT

It seems that Jesus and Peter are still on the beach, but now alone, some distance from the other disciples. But then Peter looks back and sees John following along as they talk.

Unfortunately, ol' Peter falls back into his game of comparisons. "Lord, what about John? Will he experience this cost of discipleship, too?"

It's often that way in our lives, isn't it? Jesus calls each of us on individual terms. Jesus is sovereign both over our lives and over our death. "If *I want him to remain alive until I return...*" Jesus says. You and I should not spend time worrying about the other person, their life circumstances, their commitment or lack of commitment. The issue is not *others*, but *you*. Jesus is saying, "As for *you*, follow me." Is that your desire this Easter?

ⁱ Ray Stedman, "Breakfast by the Beach," <http://www.pbc.org/library/files/html/3878.html>.

ⁱⁱ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1945), 325.