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John 21:1-25

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Resurrection in Galilee

We are on the way to Pentecost. We are earnestly awaiting a fresh wind of the spirit to energize us and inspire us toward new and resurrected life. On this fifth Sunday of Easter, we continue to celebrate that our Lord and King, the true giver of all good gifts, is not lying in a tomb but is alive, showing God's ultimate strength and power over evil, death, and destruction. This morning, we are looking at John 21, the final chapter in the fourth gospel. 2 weeks ago, I spoke from the book of Luke about the experiences of the disciples in Jerusalem and Emmaus. The disciples are struggling to make sense of their teacher and leader, back from the dead, not a ghost or merely a reanimated body, but something wholly different. Matthew 28 and Mark 16 both mention that Jesus tells his disciples to go to Galilee and wait for him there. Galilee is where Jesus's ministry had mostly taken place with the center of operation at Capernaum. Jesus and the disciples had all made their way to Jerusalem for Passover, the Jewish festival that created the backdrop for all of the events of Holy week.

After they experience the resurrected Jesus in Emmaus and Jerusalem, the disciples go back to Galilee, which is where we find them in John 21. In verse 1, the sea of Tiberius is another name for the sea of Galilee. Remembering that the gospel of John was originally a letter to a particular community, the audience might have known this particular body of water as Tiberius rather than Galilee. Or another theory would be that the author of this particular chapter knew the sea of Galilee as the sea of Tiberius when it was written. Either way, the disciples are

back in Galilee, their old stomping grounds. This body of water provided food and water for the region surrounding it. Some of the disciples before Jesus had called them were fisherman on this very lake, working in the family business and learning what would have been their livelihood as they grew older. But Jesus had changed all of that.

John's final chapter begins with 7 of the disciples on the shores of this lake. We will find out in this last chapter that something about the world and existence has fundamentally changed in light of Jesus's resurrection. The disciples may not have fully grasped what has happened, but the author of John wants us as readers to realize from the outset that something has shifted significantly in our present reality. Numbers matter in John 21. 7 is the number of completion, restoration, and fulfillment, so 7 disciples are present for this particular story. 3 of those 7 are named specifically. 3 is also an important number in the story of Israel. These three disciples named in the beginning of 21 are important actors and reminders of what has happened thus far in John's gospel. Simon Peter was one of the first disciples called by Jesus near the sea of Galilee. He was an important actor during the last supper, often speaking up when he disagreed with what Jesus was doing or asking questions when things didn't make sense to him. He also, quite infamously, denied Jesus three times, while Jesus was being tried by the Jewish and Roman authorities. Peter was also one of the first disciples to go to the tomb after Mary returned that morning to tell everyone that Jesus's body was gone.

The second disciple, Thomas, was one of the main characters from the chapter before this. Thomas could not believe that Jesus really had risen until he had seen and experienced Jesus in person and thereby become an eyewitness. Thomas's famous revelation summed up the entire gospel when he exclaimed, "My Lord and my God," and through his words, tied together both the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and the God of Israel at the same time. Jesus is

God almighty, the God who had brought the Israelites out of Egypt, the servant King and Lord of the world, and the suffering and vindicated savior of all nations. We most often remember Thomas for his unwillingness to trust the witnesses who had tried to tell him about Jesus's resurrection, but his most succinct and inspiring words are his statement once he sees the risen Messiah. My Lord and my God.

The third disciple is Nathaniel of Cana in Galilee, one of the first called by Jesus with Peter. More than just one of the first disciples, Nathaniel's origins in Cana should spark our memory as we think back to the beginning of John's gospel. Jesus's first miracle, according to the book of John, happened at a wedding party in Cana. Jesus kept the celebration going by making the water for ritual washing into wine, not just any old wine, but the best wine of the evening. Jesus's resurrection has proven true all that Jesus had tried to explain throughout his ministry. All of the laws and customs that were supposed to be inspiring the community of Israel toward holiness and powerful witness had been fulfilled in the person of Jesus, so now was the time to celebrate. Because Jesus was here, the ritual washing water had become obsolete and the promised one of God had arrived, a reason for celebration and wine rather than water. The party that had begun all the way back in chapter 2 and continued throughout Jesus's ministry in Galilee and the surrounding regions has now come to its most exciting and inspiring moment. No longer would the nation of Israel need ritual washing basins or sacrifices or visits to Jerusalem where God supposedly dwelled in the temple. God had come in a body, in a person named Jesus of Nazareth who had been murdered on a cross. But that was not the end. The new creation that had been promised and envisioned in the prophets was here. Jesus is the first fruit of this new creation, the first of resurrected body, the first of this in-breaking kingdom that he had attempted to show to Israel in the three years prior. The time for celebration and life-change is today, right

now because God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Mentioning Nathaniel as the 3rd disciple of the 7 reminds us of all that Jesus has accomplished up to this moment.

Now that they are back in Galilee, Peter and the disciples start fishing again. Though they have experienced the resurrected Jesus, they are not sure what to do about it. Jesus told them to go back to Galilee. What else do they have to do if they want to feed themselves? Fishing is what most of them had done previously, so the easiest option until Jesus tells them what is next is fishing. Can you connect with the disciples experience? How often have we profoundly experienced God's presence or provision or power in our lives, only to return to life as it was before, as if nothing has changed. Sure. Jesus came, and I experienced his presence. What else do I need to do? I wonder if the disciples were just as confused. They had never considered something as crazy as resurrection, so what was their next move. They go out fishing on the lake, only to spend all night with nothing to bring in the next morning. As daylight gives them eyes to see, they spot a stranger on the shore with a fire lit. The stranger calls to them, asking them how the fishing is going. I can just hear the disciples muttering to themselves, "Terrible" or "not worth our time" or "I should have just told Peter I was going home and going to bed" or "I can't believe this guy is asking; does it look like we are having any luck?"

Then the stranger has the audacity to tell them to try tossing the net over the other side of the boat. Doesn't he know that we have already tossed the net off both sides of the boat? What does he know anyway? Who does this guy think he is? I can hear Peter telling the other disciples, "Whatever, it's not going to hurt to toss the net in another time. It's not like we've gotten anything anyway. We'll just pull it in empty and head to shore." But they can't believe it. They start to tug on the net, and something's in it; a lot of something. They could hardly pull the catch in. The disciple whom Jesus loved looks at Peter, telling him that the person on the shore is

Jesus. Maybe it was the voice or enough daylight to see better who had spoken or maybe the miracle of all of these fish, but they know. Peter throws his cloak on and jumps out of the boat. Now what are they going to do? They're a couple of hands short with a full net. They get the boat and net to shore to find Jesus with a fire, bread, and fish, a welcomed break of their evening fast while fishing through the night. With bread and plenty of fish, Jesus feeds them breakfast like the feeding of the 5000 so many months or what felt like years ago for them. How they wished that they had as much to eat as when they had traveled with Jesus. How things were different now in Galilee, trying to fish and make a living again. What was Jesus doing here?

Jesus and Peter walk off down the shore talking. As I think about this moment, I wonder if Jesus has a stern look on his face as he asks Peter the first time, "Do you love me?" Peter, ashamed of his denial and continued inability to figure out what Jesus would have them do now, looks back at Jesus, trying to cover his guilt. "You know that I love you," Peter says. Jesus tells him to feed his sheep. As a leader of this disparate group of disciples, back in the fishing boat afraid of what is going to happen now that Jesus is back, Peter does not tell Jesus, "I love you," but you know that I do, what seems like a dodge of the actual question. Two more times, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, and by the third time, Peter is exasperated. I can almost hear the tension and frustration in his voice as Peter tries to tell Jesus of his love. His exasperated tone though reminds me of the same frustration that he had when the people of Jerusalem continued to ask him if he was connected with Jesus, and he had denied it. I wonder if at this moment, Peter realizes what Jesus is telling him. Through this conversation, Jesus helps Peter see that when Jesus called him three years ago, he had called him to fish but not with a boat on the sea of Galilee. Jesus had told him that he would fish for people and now, that time had come. Rather

than return to life as it was before, Peter is going to become one of the great leaders and witnesses to the power of Jesus's resurrection in the world.

This role that Jesus is still calling Peter to, which Jesus makes abundantly clear when he tells Peter twice in the subsequent verses to follow, is not the role that Peter is expecting. Resurrection of their leader, teacher, and Messiah has changed the entire world, and Jesus is calling Peter out of his the guilt and shame of denial into the forgiveness and new life of resurrection. However, this new commission to tell everyone how much Peter loves Jesus is going to lead Peter down the same road that Jesus has already travelled. The powers and authorities will murder him like they had murdered Jesus, but that is the road that Jesus had called them to when they had walked around Galilee. Peter hears Jesus's words, telling him of the way that his life will end in martyrdom, and I think Peter realizes that to profess his love for Jesus is to commit to living in light of resurrection. God's new creation was breaking in; Peter and the other disciples were witnesses to the risen physical body of Jesus of Nazareth, one that appears similar to their own, but still somehow different.

Three weeks ago, I asked several contributors to our online service to share how they had experienced Jesus. I had asked them to witness to a moment, in which the resurrected Jesus had come to them like the disciples in Galilee. Up to this moment, the disciples have held their knowledge of Jesus's resurrection close to the chest. They are so uncertain of how to carry on Jesus's ministry and message that they start into life as it was, fishing to make a living. I wonder how often I have done the same. I have experienced the power and presence of God in my life, the revelation of how God is renewing our broken and distorted world, only to return to life as usual. Do I do this because I am afraid to answer Jesus's question to Peter: Randall, do you love me? Do I have the courage, hope, and guts to profess my love for Jesus, that I am will be a

witness to how Jesus has changed my life and continues to reshape the world around us? I want to say yes. I want to say what Peter has already said. “You know that I love you, Jesus.” And then, I look away afraid to see or hear where he is really calling me.

I also think about how I have made excuses for what Jesus has called me to by deflecting Jesus’s plea to follow and asking about someone or something else? What about this, Jesus? What about that? What about him or her? Aren’t you calling them too? I can hear Jesus’s reply, “what is it that to you Randall.” The risen Jesus will not be deflected or distracted. He looks me in the eye with hope and comfort and life and grace and peace, and he says, “Follow Me.” Resurrection and new life are here. Will you follow?