

Rev. Jennifer Peters McCurry
Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church, Bellevue, PA
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John 21:1-19 • Acts 9:1-6

Isn't it interesting that the disciples returned to their old ways? The events of Holy Week and Easter had been so dramatic: from Jesus' arrest and suffering and death, to his surprising and glorious resurrection. By this point in the gospel of John, we have heard tales of Jesus showing himself to the women and to the disciples, near Jerusalem. The good news had been demonstrated. The prophecies had been fulfilled.

Even though Jesus had told them beforehand, no one really expected it. No disciple had asked questions about what would come next for them. Even if they had asked, chances are that Jesus' answer would have been mysterious and confusing.

Life is too much to take some times. I certainly want to return to the familiar when I'm on overload. So these seven disciples went back to what they knew: fishing. The whole night passed with no sign of fish – not one! It appeared that they would return to shore with empty nets and weary hearts.

Often it seems like the nets of our lives are empty. Our efforts seem futile. Like the disciples, many of us are drained by the ups and downs of life. Our jobs

and our care for loved ones seem to suck the life out of us. The stress of paying the bills today – or worrying about the future tomorrow – wears on us. We hear continued news of disasters happening around the globe. Some of us are lonely and wishing for companionship. Some of us are struggling with health problems or tense family relationships. We may not talk about the empty places in our lives very often, but they remain with us. Nets that were meant to be filled, and re-filled, again and again. Empty nets, which are heavier to carry than we imagined.

As individuals, and as a people, we long for the Spirit to fill our nets – to renew our souls and our entire lives. We hope for that in ways that are more than just how we often think about faith, as if it were in our heads or our hearts. We want God’s renewal and transformation. The Easter news of Jesus’ resurrection tells us that such new life is possible. Even when our spirits are dragged down and weary. Even when we have analyzed the problem and can’t find a solution. Even when we’re certain “that’s just the way it is.”

God’s uncontainable power has rolled one stone away – and is the only real match for the obstacles in our human lives. For the disciples, it was the risen Christ’s presence among them which made all the difference. The disciples followed his command: “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find

some.” (*Jn 21:6*) All of a sudden, they had more fish than they could haul! They were blessed by God’s presence and abundance, even when they weren’t sure what a resurrected Jesus meant for their lives. In this story, the results are very tangible, embodied in the livelihood of the disciples.

Like the disciples, Jesus’ Spirit comes to us. Wherever we are, in our normal, everyday lives, the Holy Spirit comes to us. Ready to fill the emptiness and the longing that we carry with us. Present to be the breath that fills our lungs and the energy that lights our lives. Calling us to continue to follow Christ’s path. Inviting us to feast.

I’m aware of the tension of our times. We experience difficulties and emptiness and brokenness in life. There are the Bible’s proclamations of Christ’s presence and power in our world. We live somewhere in between. It can seem like the spiritual ideas and ideals don’t connect to what is “real.”

I believe that there is a very real connection between them – just as Christ’s presence brought oodles of fish to the disciples. It’s not that I think that we can just sit back and pray, and all that we want will happen. Like you, I turn to experts – doctors, financial advisors, therapists, authors – to try to heal some of the broken things in my life.

As 21st century people – and Lutherans, at that – one challenge for us is being aware of and naming the risen Christ’s presence among us. The gospel today coaxes us to be aware of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Do you experience her in your life? Our church teaches that Christ’s Spirit is especially present in the sacraments of the church. Scripture also tells us that God is with us:

- in quiet moments of prayer;
- in our relationships; and
- in the face of our neighbors in need.

I would add some of my own. Christ is:

- in the joy that I discover when I know I’m exhausted;
- in unexpected, boundless generosity;
- in the Saturday afternoon that seems to both fly by and last forever, because I treasured every wonderful minute.

The Spirit is blessing us in our daily lives. When have you been aware of God’s presence in your life in the last week or so? When have you seen a glimpse of Jesus Christ? If you have a neighbor close by, turn to your neighbor and share where you have sensed God with one another. *Pause.*

For all these moments of communion with God, I give thanks! For all the times when we miss Christ's presence in our lives, I pray that our eyes and ears will be opened.

Like Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, and company – it makes a difference when we behold the risen Christ. Seeing Jesus among us may not solve all our problems with the snap of his fingers. But it helps us to live as disciples. God is no longer a far-off idea – or the subject of old Bible stories. God is a living, moving presence in our lives. Being aware of God puts us one step closer to understanding what our faith means here and now. Being aware of God prepares us to discern what we are called to do and to be, amid our life's challenges and delights. The church should be a community in which we honor God's action in our lives – point out to one another what we do not see – and celebrate what we witness.

Yesterday, and today, Jesus comes to his disciples – uninvited, unexpected, filling emptiness with generosity and grace. He calls to us. Blesses us. Feeds us. Again and again. Amen.