



April 18, 2010 - The Rev. Scott Pittendrigh

Text: Acts 9: 1-20; John 21:1-19

Resource used: Gospel Medicine, by Barbara Brown Taylor

O Risen One, Life-giving Lover of Souls:
guide us as we seek to build up your Church
on earth, drawing others into the warmth
of your saving embrace; to the honour and glory of your
most blessed name, from this time forth and for ever more. Amen.

If you were to turn to the end of the Gospel of John you would notice something quite interesting. You would see that it does not end once, but twice. In the first ending, Jesus came to his disciples as they covered behind locked doors. He breathed new life into them and sent them forth in his name. He gave them peace. In this part of his gospel, (chapter 20) John made it sound like the end, but it was not the end, or at least not the only end, because in the twenty-first chapter we have another story about Jesus and his disciples, the second ending of John's gospel.

If it is all a little confusing, it is hard to blame John, because everyone knows how hard it is to come to an end. You think you have said everything, and then you think of something else, something too important to leave out. "P.S.," you type at the bottom of the letter or email, and maybe even a "P.P.S." after that, because it is hard to stop, hard to finally click the "send" button and call it done.

On the whole, human beings are not good at endings. We are much better at beginnings, when everything is new and exciting and full of possibilities. We like to hold babies better than we like to visit nursing homes. We like daybreak better than midnight. We like saying hello better than we like saying goodbye, but it is not as if we get to choose, is it? We have plenty of both in our lives—beginnings and endings—roughly one of each for everything that really matters to us at all. So it is hard to blame John for lingering over his ending for a while. He wanted to make sure he had said it all. He wanted to make sure he had given us everything we would need to make it through the long nights we might have to wait before our next daybreak came. He did not know how long it would be for us, but he knew how long it had been for some of the disciples, so he decided to tell us a story about them that might help us out.

The well known preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "It happened sometime after the first Easter, no one knows when exactly, but long enough for the disciples to have left Jerusalem and made the long trek back to Galilee. It was home for them. It was the place where everything had begun for them, which made it the natural place for them to return once it seemed that everything had come to an end. There were seven of them, John says, which means that they were already coming apart at the seams, some of them going one direction while the others went another. These seven decide to go fishing. They return, in other words to what they have always done.

Fishing is a good excuse for thinking after all, for just sitting quietly and letting silence do its healing work. It is a good thing to do when you want to do nothing, nothing but sit and watch your cork drift, knowing that your line is down there somewhere in the deep waters, just like you are, waiting to catch something, to hook something that will make it all worthwhile.



But fishing has added meaning for these seven, because it is their occupation—or was, before Jesus showed up. They do not fish for pleasure; they fish for a living. They do not fish with lines and hooks; they fish with big, heavy nets that smell of seaweed and dried fish scales, hauling them out of the bottom of the boat with hands that are calloused from years of casting and knotting and straining against the ropes. So when they decide to go fishing, it is not a decision to daydream but a decision to return to their former way of life, to go back to the only thing they know how to do without him.

He is gone, after all. They have not seen him since Jerusalem, and while that was a powerful time none of them will ever forget, it is now time to get on with life. Memory is one thing, but the future is another. His life on earth may have ended, but theirs have not, and they have to do something about getting food on their tables and roofs over their heads. He is gone, and it is time for them to start looking after themselves again.

So they go fishing, each of them sunk in his own thoughts as he climbs into the old familiar boat again, one of them reaching out to steady the prow while the others step inside and take their old familiar places, swamped with *déjà vu*. They have all been here before, but when? A hundred years ago or just yesterday? Maybe it was all a dream too good to be true, the way he walked up to them, and spoke to them like someone they had known all their lives so that there was no doubt what they would do when he called out to them to follow.

They should have known better than to have believed it, to have staked their lives on something that could come to such a quick and bloody end. They should have known that it would all boil down to business as usual, back to the grind, all their wild, joyful expectation reduced to grim resignation as they go back to their nets. Only it does not work – to go back! They fish all night long without catching a single thing. Time after time their nets come up empty, a perfect match for their hearts. So now what? They cannot go forward and they cannot go back. All they can do is sit in the dark and watch the sky change colour as the sun rises behind the hills.

That is when they hear him. They cannot see him, but they can hear him, someone, calling out to them across the water, guessing the truth – that they have no fish—and suggesting that they try the other side of the boat.

So they do, and the water begins to boil, all at once so dense with fish that some of them are pushed right out of the water, their shining fins glinting in the morning light. It is *déjà vu* again: the boats, the nets, the stranger calling out to them. It is not the end after all, or else the end has led them back to the beginning again.

"It is the Lord!" says the beloved disciple, also guessing the truth, and what has been a dismal midnight scene becomes pure daybreak pandemonium. Peter throws himself into the water, leaving the others with all the hard work. They scramble for their oars, catching up with Peter just as he reaches the beach, and what all of them arrive to find is a charcoal fire with fish on it, and bread, and Jesus their beloved cook.

"Come," he says to his wet, happy disciples, "and have breakfast."



If you have ever eaten breakfast on a beach, then your imagination is already working overtime: copper-coloured coals glowing in the sand, heat rising in the cold morning, wood smoke curling through your hair, fish sizzling over the low flames, the sound of the sea sloshing behind you. It is a dream, all right, only a dream too good not to be true. He is not serving supper this time. That was the last meal of their old life together. This is the first meal of their new life together--a resurrection breakfast, prepared by the only one who knows the recipe.

I do not know why so many of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances have something to do with food, but they do. It happens twice in Luke's gospel – first on the road to Emmaus, where Jesus is made known to two of his disciples in the breaking of bread, and then later, when he appears to them all and eats a piece of broiled fish in their presence. Then there is this meal, which is so reminiscent of that other meal by the Sea of Galilee, where he took five loaves and two fish and fed everyone in sight.

Maybe it is because eating is so necessary for life, and so is he. Or maybe it is because sharing food is what makes us human. Most other species forage alone, so that feeding is a solitary business, but human beings seem to love eating together. Even when we are alone, most of us will open a magazine or turn on the television just for company. It is, at any rate, one of the clues of his presence. There is always the chance, when we are eating together, that we will discover the risen Lord in our midst.

This story is full of clues for those times when we too are marooned on the sea in the middle of the night, afraid that we have come to the end of something without any idea how to begin again. In the first place, it is probably a good idea to pay attention to strangers, especially those who seem to know things about you that they really have no way of knowing. Whether they are giving you unsolicited advice about where to cast your nets or just standing there looking at you with eyes like daybreak, it is probably a good idea to pay attention to them since Jesus has a whole closet full of disguises.

Another clue that he may be somewhere around is a sudden change in fortune--not rags to riches, necessarily, since he actually seems to prefer rags to riches--but a sudden change in the way your life looks to you. One moment it looks hopeless to you and the next you see possibilities you never saw before. One moment your problems look too big to be budged and the next you discover handles on them you never knew were there before. One moment the net looks empty and the next it does not. There is something wriggling in it where there was nothing just a moment before. It may be a little or it may be a lot, but it is alive--a living thing where there was nothing but darkness and death before.

"It is the Lord!" That is what the beloved disciple said. How did he know? How does any of us know? By staying on the lookout, I suppose. By watching the shore, and the sky, and each other's faces. By listening really hard. By living in great expectation and refusing to believe that our nets will stay empty or our nights will last forever.

For those with ears to hear, there is a voice that can turn all our dead ends into new beginnings.

"Come," that voice says, "and have breakfast."

Amen.

