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John 21:1-19
April 3, 2016
“In the Light of the Charcoal Fire”

Last week many of us gathered here, in this same space, as we had a glorious celebration as we declared the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We celebrated Jesus, the one crucified, buried, and then who rose again on the third day, just like he promised he would. We celebrated that our God is a God of upside down and inside out!

This morning we gather once again in this same place to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. In fact each Sunday offers us an opportunity to gather together to once again rehearse and remind ourselves of this central narrative which guides our lives as followers of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus offers us both redemption and forgiveness as well as hope and grace, for because he lives we *can* face tomorrow.

However, we would be missing some of the biblical narrative if we simply dwelled on the significant reality of how amazing it is that Jesus rose from the dead. Or if we were to just assume that with the resurrection everything continued just perfect with the disciples and others learning about this man named Jesus. Instead as we sit with the stories of the Bible we read of individuals who struggled to make sense of what this all means, and those who struggled to discern what their place was in the coming kingdom of God. There were followers of Jesus who struggled with their memories and ways to reconcile the past with the present, let alone meshing the past with the future. Today’s text in John chapter twenty-one is such an example of reconciliation, mission, restoration, and God’s grace, abundant, life-transforming grace.

Prior to our text for this morning in chapter twenty we read of Mary Magdalene seeing the stone rolled away from the empty tomb. She returned and told Peter and another disciple and they too ran to the tomb and also saw the strips of linen but not the body of Jesus, their teacher

and Lord. Fascinating to note, here Peter remains silent. He doesn't verbally respond to this discovery. Yet, it is Peter who throughout the gospel has been quick to speak, act, or jump in. Yet at the tomb we find a silent Peter.

Continuing on in chapter twenty we read of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, and then to the disciples at two different occasions. And yet even still we hear no words from Peter. No confrontation between him and Jesus, no words of reconciliation or healing or grace or hope. But what a minute what am I exactly talking about? If you were to turn back several chapters to chapter thirteen we find the passage that was read just recently at our Maundy Thursday service. We find Jesus and disciples in the upper room, lounging around a table. After the dinner Jesus took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist and began to wash his disciples' feet. In verse six we read that

Jesus came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?'
 Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.'
 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."
 Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."
 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Then later in the same chapter Jesus predicts his betrayal and in verse twenty-one we read:

"Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me."

Now of course we would expect Peter, bold, loud, eager, energetic Peter to say something to this proclamation. In verse twenty-four we learn that in response Peter motions to the disciple beside him and said "You ask him what he means." It was as if Peter was scared to ask himself, immobilized by his fear for how Jesus would answer the question. Yet later in the chapter in verse thirty-seven we see the good ol' Peter shining through as he makes his bold proclamation that he would be willing to lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus does not congratulate him or even affirm his testimony of faith. Instead Jesus responds to Peter with a question and a prediction:

“Peter, will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!”

Then, it appears Peter goes silent and we hear nothing more from Peter until chapter eighteen when we find him with Jesus in the garden. The officials have arrived to arrest Jesus and this clearly does not match the Messiah that Peter thinks Jesus is, or the way Jesus is going to usher in the new kingdom. And in chapter eighteen verse ten we read of Peter once again acting on impulse, over eager to be engaged with the ministry of Jesus as he pulls out the sword and cuts off the ear of the servant. As Jesus is led away we are told that Peter and another disciple follow at a distance. There in the courtyard, gathered around a charcoal fire to find warmth, we read the simple question asked of Peter: “You aren’t one of this man’s disciples too, are you?”

I find myself holding my breath and willing Peter to say boldly, confidently, relentlessly, yes, yes in fact I am. Instead he said, “I am not.” Later in verse twenty-five Peter is still huddled around this charcoal fire, standing in the light that it gave off, seeking its warmth and safety. I have to imagine that as he huddles around that charcoal fire he is feeling a coldness deep into his soul and not just his skin as he is asked again: “You aren’t one of his disciples too, are you?” Again, holding our breath we wait just expecting that Peter will recall the bold proclamation he made to Jesus not too long before. Instead Peter says four little words full of meaning, “No, I am not.” Still gathered around the fire a relative of the man whose ear Peter cut off asked him, “Didn’t I see you with him in the garden?” Now there is an eye witness linking him to Jesus. Again we hold our breath remembering bold, eager, energetic, outspoken, confident Peter. And yet we are told that again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow. We then hear nothing else about Peter during the narrative of Jesus’ passion and death. Jesus is crucified and Peter is nowhere around. The next we see him is at the empty tomb, where he remains silent.

If you have your Bibles turn with me now to John chapter twenty-one. “Jesus’ disciples have returned home. They are seemingly seeking to return to the life they knew before the sudden violent end of their leader. Peter, not knowing what else to do, says, “I’m going fishing.” It is a deep and understandable human impulse, after a tragic event, to return home and to seek the comfort of familiar activities....It seems that Jesus’ disciples are doing something similar, returning to the waters where they had made their living as fishermen before trying to get their balance back by doing the only thing they know how to do. It is as though they are trying to forget about the strange interlude in their lives that Jesus introduced. So Peter decides to go fishing, and the others join him.”ⁱ I wonder if they returned to Galilee because they just couldn’t reconcile the past with the present or the past with the future. I wonder if Peter returned to Galilee because he just assumed that based on his blatant rejection of Jesus that he was no longer fit to be a fisher of people, and therefore he was demoted back to only seek fish and not people.

“But it’s not easy to go home again. After life with Jesus, nothing is quite the same any more. The disciples find that their effort to return to business as usual is marked by futility. They have spent the whole night in the boat and caught nothing.”ⁱⁱ Despite that fishing in the Sea of Galilee is generally best at night they still end up with empty nets and empty stomachs.ⁱⁱⁱ Again it is this effort to reconcile the past with the present. Who am I from where I have come from, and where am I headed and with what purpose?

Well in the distant there is a man on the shore and he called out “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” Just like the questions asked to Peter around the charcoal fire in chapter 18, this question too anticipates a negative answer. They say no. So this man, whom we as readers know is Jesus, instructs them to throw the net on the other side.

Now I wonder if you might be like me. In my own life I have tried to solve a problem and feel like I have exhausted every possible angle to the problem only for someone to come along and casually say “Well, if you would *just* try A or B”. I find that during those times I get quite annoyed and want to say “well my dear, I have already tried A and B. And c, d, e, f, and g.” I know that I do not find that I have much patience for that kind of advice and would have found myself a little more annoyed at this stranger on the beach. I mean come on, this was not their first fishing experience. So thank you very much stranger, but you see unlike you we have been at this all night. But perhaps even out of desperation or a sense that they would have nothing to lose, the disciples throw the net to the other side. And they did it and were unable to haul in the net.

Then one of the disciples said to Peter four little words full of meaning: “It is the Lord!” With this Peter puts on his outer garment and throws himself into the lake and starts swimming to shore, about a hundred yards away, while the rest follow in the boat. Ah yes, here is the Peter we know. As Peter pulls himself to shore he see Jesus standing by a charcoal fire. I can imagine Peter pausing and catching his breath and remembering the last time he was gathered around a charcoal fire. (Interesting to note, the word for charcoal fire only occurs twice in the Gospel of John. Once in chapter 18 as Peter gathers around it in the courtyard and then again here in chapter 21 on the seaside.)^{iv} The last time Peter was around a charcoal fire was when he denied knowing Jesus not once, or twice, but three times. Perhaps his step falters as he comes up on Jesus and begins to question, do I belong? What will Jesus say if I step into the light of the fire? Am I invited here? Am I worthy enough to come and share another meal with the very one I betrayed and denied and walked away from? Maybe my shame is too great, my guilt too big, maybe just maybe I am simply not enough?

Fires are quite intriguing. They provide warmth. They provide heat as a cooking source. They also provide light as the flames shoot upward they radiate outwards illuminating everything in its path. And here Peter stands in the light of the charcoal fire. Jesus says normal, everyday words, as if the trauma and drama and miracle of the previous days didn't occur – come and have breakfast. Jesus then in turn takes the bread and the fish and serves those gathered in the light of the fire. There is no questioning of Peter, no condemnation, no judgment, just serving him in the same way he fed the multitude with the loaves and the fishes, and the ways he served his disciples the bread and the cup on the night he was betrayed.

Perhaps as Peter chewed on the fish and the bread it seemed to keep growing in his mouth as his anxiety and shame rose deep from his stomach. He not only denied knowing Jesus, he also deserted him in the time when he needed him the most. In verse fifteen we read:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter:

“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Again Jesus said, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said,

“Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

This emotion filled interchange is the process of reconciliation and healing of Peter's memory. “Three times Peter denied Jesus... Jesus now engages Peter, eye to eye, extending to him three times the opportunity and grace to renew his love for Jesus, which Peter had ardently pledged at the Last Supper... Peter does say yes three times and three times Jesus commissions him to a leadership role in the church... In this emotionally filled interchange between Jesus and Peter God bestows grace to Peter, replacing those horrible memories of his denials while

standing by the fire with another later standing by the seaside fire to renew Peter's pledge to follow, now based on love.^v However, we must acknowledge that for Peter as well as for us these confessions do not come without pain. "Confronting the risen Jesus is not easy, especially for those who have betrayed him. Standing in the flickering light of the charcoal fire, Peter (and us) must first remember his (our) failure – and own it... We stand by the charcoal fire, and we can't help remembering, in the dawning light, things we had hoped to forget. We see, in the light of this fire, the self-deceptions that have masked our thousand little betrayals of the truth. This fire burns away our pretenses."^{vi}

And so we ask ourselves the difficult questions – when have we denied knowing Jesus? When have we been the betrayer? When have we passed over someone in need without extending the hands of Christ? When have we wronged others? What have been our own foolish boasts and confident assertions that in the end we were not able to live up to? When have we aimed high and dreadfully missed the mark as a follower of Jesus? As we stand in the light of the charcoal fire what are the truths that emerge from our pasts?

Like Peter we can imagine ourselves by the fire, standing in the light of the charcoal fire, in the presence of our Risen Savior. There like Peter, I believe Jesus extends the possibilities of a renewed relationship, healing our memories, and recommissioning each of us for the future. Come and have breakfast. Come and be present and among and within. Come, step into the light and bring to light the pain and baggage and failures you are toting around. Come, receive food to nourish your bodies and souls. Come, join a network of others who will help you see when Jesus is in your midst. Come, recommit to following Jesus and as you do so Jesus will reinstate you and our mission as a follower of him. Come, stand and then kneel and then dance in the illuminating grace filled light.

As we settle into God's grace we can heal our memories, releasing them in the light of the fire, and wrap ourselves in the cloak of grace. With this new cloak our vision also changes as we see ourselves and those around us. For the first time this week I wondered if any of the other disciples questioned Peter's place at the fire that morning as Jesus served the bread and the fish? Do you think that there were any whispering behind his back as people wondered what *he* was doing back here? Clearly he didn't belong, I mean look at the choices he has made! Or the other disciples said fine be here but we'll just wait until you miss the mark yet again. You know, we are not holding our breath or anything. Oh how we need to be reminded, daily reminded, that God's grace and forgiveness and reconciliation are for me and just as much it is for you and you and you. Furthermore, our role is to bring people to the fire and then allow God's grace to do the illuminating redemptive work.

Our text does not say that Peter broke out in song and danced. However, I like to think that he did. If he had I think he would have sang a song like "Grace Wins" by Matthew West. I believe that Peter understood that there was war between guilt and grace and that they were fighting for sacred space, and yet Peter could boldly, energetically, enthusiastically, proclaim that I'm living proof grace wins every time. And may it be our song as well. May we allow the light of the charcoal fire to illuminate our past as we also welcome Jesus's invitation to breakfast, to feed his lambs, to love him, to reconciliation, and to follow. Yes, I'm living proof that grace wins every time and I pray that you will join me in that song of being redeemed in the light of the fire.

ⁱ Richard Hays, “Standing by the Fire”, in *Preaching John’s Gospel: The World it Imagines*, David Fleer & Dave Bland, editors (Chalice Press: St. Louis, Missouri), 15.

ⁱⁱ Hays, *Standing by the Fire*, 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willard Swartley, *John: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Herald Press: Harrisonburg, Virginia), 479.

^{iv} Swartley, *John*, 481.

^v Willard Swartley, *Living Gift: John’s Jesus in Meditation and Poetry, Art and Song* (Evangel Publishing House: Nappanee, Indiana), 146-147.

^{vi} Hays, *Standing by the Fire*, 15-16.