

Even When It's Over (Second Sunday of Easter)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
 Settle our hearts.
 Still our minds.
 And stir our imaginations,
 That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

John 20:30-21:14

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he showed himself in this way.

Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't realize it was Jesus. Jesus called to them,

"Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." He said, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the sea. The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they weren't far from shore, only about one hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you've just caught." Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore.

It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn't torn, even with so many fish. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Even When It's Over

Have you ever noticed that the Gospel of John has two endings? I don't know why you would have, unless you enjoy reading the gospels straight through. Most people only hear the Bible read on Sunday mornings and then only in preselected chunks, so I suspect this odd truth about John's gospel often goes unnoticed. But John's gospel has two endings.

The first ending happens in chapter 20, which is the chapter we read from on Easter morning. On Easter, we read the first 18 verses, which takes us through Mary Magdalene encountering Jesus in the garden and then going to tell the disciples. But chapter 20 goes on and tells the story of Jesus encountering the disciples in a locked room. You know that story don't you?

It takes place on Easter evening, when the disciples are gathered together in a locked room, fearful that the authorities who crucified Jesus might come for them next. Jesus appears in their midst and says, "peace be with you; as God has sent me, so I am sending you." And then Jesus does this strange thing and breathes on them, telling them to receive the Holy Spirit (which always causes me to wonder what resurrected breath smells like_; is it *better* than morning breath? worse?). What makes this story familiar to most people isn't this encounter, however, it's what happens after, when Thomas arrives and realizes he has missed the risen Christ, when Thomas insists that he will not believe Jesus has risen until he can put his finger in the mark of the nails on Christ's hands and sides, which is another strange bodily detail—first resurrection breath and now the desire to touch wounds.

Jesus does come again, according to John's gospel. He comes back a week later when Thomas is present, and when that encounter concludes, we get the first ending of John, which we heard this morning: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

The end.

Right?

Doesn't it sound like the end? Jesus did other stuff, too, but we wrote *this* stuff down so that you'd believe. The end.

It's over. John wrote down the stories that he thought we needed to hear in order to know that Jesus is the Messiah, and before he concludes, he makes sure that we know that his account is not exhaustive—Jesus did other stuff too. But, at some point, you've got to end the book. And that is a solid ending.

Except John *doesn't* end here.

After saying there are many other signs which are not written in this book, John writes more in the book! Or somebody does. Preacher Barbara Lundblad writes, "It doesn't really matter how it got there, the clear truth is that after it's over, it isn't over. After all was said and done, after everything was written that needed to be written ... another chapter, another ending. After it's over, it isn't over."¹

Lundblad goes on to preach about how meaningful this double ending has become to her since her retirement: "someone asks you what you do," she says, "and you answer, I'm retired, and that is the end of the conversation. It's over."

You don't have to be retired to have experienced this. Most of us have experienced moments or seasons in our lives when something that defined us has ended and we feel completely adrift—when we wonder who we are without that person we loved? Without the job that provided meaning and structure to our life for decades? Without our children at home? Without our health or the agility we had five years ago? I have yet to meet anyone who makes it through this life without experiencing the end at least once or twice.

The question is, what do you do when it's over?

What would *you* have done after the risen Jesus appeared to you in a locked room where everyone was terrified? After Jesus breathed on you and told you to receive the Holy Spirit?

Simon Peter said, "I am going fishing." And the other disciples say, "we will go with you." It's like a phrase out of an ESL workbook, Lundblad notes, "I am going fishing. We will go with you." Elementary grammar aside, it seems like a strange choice, fishing. I'm not a fishing kind of person, so maybe I just don't get it, but ... I don't get it. The resurrected Jesus has just appeared to you, gifted you with the Holy Spirit, and commissioned you to go out into the world—fishing feels ... anticlimactic.

And also, this story about fishing, it's supposed to come earlier in the gospel. All of the other gospel writers put it at the beginning because it's how Jesus calls the sons of Zebedee and Peter from their boats. As Mark and Matthew tell it, the soon-to-be disciples drop their nets and follow Jesus, but Luke tells it the same way John does—the disciples have been out fishing all night and have caught nothing. Then Jesus appears on the shore and tells them to drop their nets on the other side of the boat.

In Luke's version, this comment rankles Peter, who protests that they have been out all night and there are no fish. But in John's version, the disciples simply do as Jesus says. In both versions, they catch a lot of fish. As Luke tells it, there were so many the nets were splitting.

¹ Barbara Lundblad, "It's Over," 2023 Festival of Homiletics.

John adds another strange detail, telling us that 153 fish were caught. Really? 153? Such a strange detail. You can't tell me someone sat there and counted those fish. So, why 153? Why not 40? That's a more biblical number. Regardless, what rankles Peter in Luke's version helps Peter *recognize* Jesus in John's telling. So Peter puts on his clothes, because he was fishing naked, and jumps into the water.

Let's just say that again. Peter, who is fishing naked, because ... I don't know why (again, not a fishing kind of person), recognizes that it is Jesus on the shore, and *puts on* his clothes to swim to shore.

Hannah and I recently started reading *Wayside School is Falling Down* by Louis Sachar and I can't help but feel like Sachar may have taken some pointers from the writer of John's gospel. If you haven't read the *Wayside School* books, I recommend them, but reading them for the first time is not dissimilar from reading the end of John's gospel. For example, on the second page of *Wayside School is Falling Down*, we learn that "Wayside school [is] thirty stories high, with only one room on each story ... [but, if you're climbing the stairs, because there's no elevator at Wayside School, you can step] easily from the eighteenth story to the twentieth. [Because] there [is] no nineteenth story. Miss Zarves taught the class on the nineteenth story. There is no Miss Zarves."² There is no 19th story. Miss Zarves teaches the class on the 19th story. There is no Miss Zarves.

First there's the end that isn't the end, then there's resurrection breath and the desire to touch open wounds, and now we have a story that's in the wrong place, 153 fish, and Peter fishing naked only to put on his clothes when he jumps in the water. It feels like John is trying to make sure we're paying attention. And what happens next only adds to the strangeness of this ending after the ending. Because when the disciples come ashore, Jesus has a charcoal fire going and is cooking fish and bread. It's the only reference in the Bible to Jesus cooking. Rev. Lundblad, the same preacher who resonated so strongly with John's ending after the ending, wonders why there are no stained glass windows of this Bible story—why no soldered-together-glass images of Jesus with a hot pad and a spatula? (Perhaps it's something we could look into as part of our sanctuary redesign—a big stained glass window of Jesus cooking over an open fire.)

Now if you've been reading along in John's gospel, or if you arrived at this morning's text via Holy Week, then you might recall that this is not the first reference to a charcoal fire in John's gospel. Back in chapter 18, when Jesus is arrested and taken to house of the high priest, Peter follows along and finds himself in the courtyard of the house warming himself by the charcoal fire. And it is here that Peter is asked, three times, if he is one of Jesus's disciples. And it by this first charcoal fire that Peter denies Jesus three times. It must have felt, in that moment, when

² Louis Sachar, *Wayside School is Falling Down*, p. 2.

the cock crowed as he stood before that charcoal fire, it must have felt to Peter like it was over. He had done the very thing that he had sworn he would not do. Jesus was about to be crucified and Peter had failed to stand with him. It was over for Peter.

Only, it isn't over. Because whoever added this postscript to John's gospel remembered that charcoal fire and put it here, at the end, so that Peter would know that it wasn't over, so that we might know that even when it's over, it isn't really over. Our passage for this morning ends at verse 14, but John's final, final chapter goes through verse 25. And in verse 15, we read, "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." Jesus said to Peter a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because Jesus had asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" But Peter said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

Three times Peter denies Jesus, and three times he is given the opportunity to confess his love for Jesus. Because when it's over, it isn't over.

After this, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me." Follow me. At the end, not the beginning. And then this ending after the ending concludes with these words, "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Because it isn't over.

The ending of John's gospel is strange: it doesn't end when it says it's going to, it includes these bizarre details that cause a reader to pause and wonder, and it puts a story from the beginning of Jesus' ministry at the end. All so that Peter might know, so that we might know, that even when it should be over, even when it *feels* like it is surely over, even then, there is another page, another story to be told.

Thanks be to God. Amen.