

Sermon – May 3, 2020
“It is the Lord!”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: John 21:1-14

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry. Amen

Christ is Risen!

Type in those responses!

Good morning everyone and welcome to another live stream for the Northumberland Charge from Afton UMC in beautiful downtown Ophelia, Virginia. Thank you for joining us this morning to worship our Lord. I want to extend my thanks to the musicians who have come to help us worship and to the support team who makes our live stream possible.

Jesus has been appearing to his disciples and followers starting with Mary Magdalene at the tomb, then to followers on the road to Emmaus and the disciples in the upper room, and now Jesus will appear to some of the disciples again, this time in Galilee. As we heard the Gospel of John read this morning, we again encounter a risen Lord and become witnesses with the disciples to his resurrection. As we heard this text read, questions may have formed in our minds such as, “Why this appearance?” or “What key information does this appearance provide that the others have not already given to us?” That is our mission this morning, to look at this scripture’s witness to a resurrected Lord and see what it holds for us that brings deeper understanding of a risen Lord.

One of the first things John tells us about in this appearance is that it is outside of Jerusalem. It takes place at the Sea of Tiberias or the Sea of Galilee. In Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospels, Mary Magdalene is told by the angel to tell the disciples to go to Galilee and Jesus will meet them there. John does not include that information in his Gospel, but he does record an appearance of Jesus in Galilee at the close of his Gospel. So, a simple answer to our question of why is the appearance necessary or included is that it fulfills Jesus’ command and instruction to

the disciples that he will appear to them in Galilee. However, that simple answer to our question is not the complete reason for this appearance. So, we need to look deeper into the details of this appearance.

There are clues in this text that will help us answer our questions. If we look at the text, we will notice that Simon Peter's name is mentioned five times in these few verses. If we will look deeper and read carefully, we will also discover that John, while not named directly, is also a key participant in the actions that unfold during this appearance. And there are other clues for us to use. In the text we will find the words "fish," "fishing," and the second of only two uses of a Greek word for a cooking or warming fire, translated into English as a charcoal fire. With all of these clues in hand, let's look at the text and see if we can identify some unfinished business that Jesus might need to complete, some healing that must occur, some leadership that must be awakened in the disciples to allow them to lead the church in light of a resurrected Lord.

As I read this text, I imagine this has been a time when these disciples have been waiting for a while and they are bored. They are hanging out by the sea waiting, and finally Peter, with his quick decision leadership style, grows tired of waiting and says, "I am going fishing." Notice Peter's impulsive leadership style. He is the guy with the new ideas and new starts. He has waited around long enough. He needs to be doing something, so he decides to go fishing. Now I like to fish. I have not taken much time to fish in recent years, but I do like to fish. So, I can readily imagine when Peter says he is going fishing that all of these fishermen are also ready to go. In the scripture, we hear their collective reply, "We will go with you." Fishing sounds like a good thing to do. And I have to be honest and tell you I recognize this type of leadership and a moment like this in my life. I can recall saying, "Let's go to Alaska and work on homes, it will be fun," and people said, "We will go with you." Or, in a much earlier time in my life, someone said, "Let's go hunting after Christmas, it's not that cold." And a bunch of guys said, without thinking, "I will go with you." I have to be honest, not every time that I have had one of those ideas or agreed to one of them has it always turned out well. So, when I read this scripture, I just start thinking, this might not be the best idea, this fishing trip might not end well. I wonder where is that voice among the disciples that says, "Aren't we supposed to be waiting for Jesus? Shouldn't we wait here like he asked us to until he comes?"

From hearing the scripture, we know that Peter's fishing trip ends up being a night on the water with a lot of casting of nets, rowing the boat, and working, but no fish, no catching. This

group of men spend the night on the water and as the sun comes up, they are tired and have no fish. What I have learned about fishing on this lake at this time in history is that the nets used were made of cloth. That means there is a reason they fished at night. At night in the dark, the fish can't see the nets, so they can't avoid them and they can be caught. With the coming of the day, the fish can see the nets and avoid them, so with daybreak the fishing ends. It might be helpful to our understanding of this scripture if we understand a little more about fishing in first century Israel. Typically, there would be two boats working a large net. The net has floats on one side and weights on the other, and it is worked by the boats to encircle a school of fish. Each boat would work an end of the net and once the school was walled in by this large net, each boat would use a smaller cast net to catch the trapped fish and pull them to the side of the boat where the fish were hauled into the boat. Because the nets were not strong enough to take the strain of being hauled over the side when loaded with fish, a boat would have a swimmer who would get into the water and help empty the fish out of the net into the boat.

At this point, we are told Jesus calls to this weary group of men from the shore, saying, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" Jesus does not ask questions because he needs information. He knows their situation, that the sun is up, and not only do they not have any fish, but they are no longer hoping to catch any. Their all-night "this is a great idea" fishing trip, has been done in their strength and power and they have no fish, no catch, only weary bodies and a night of wasted time.

This same voice from the nearby shore calls out to them again telling them to "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." Now, my experience has been when there are no fish, this does not work. If you can't catch fish on one side of the boat, you can't catch them on the other side either. I am a little surprised that they cast the net. Maybe they think this person on the shore can see something they cannot. For whatever reason, they follow this suggestion and cast the net and it fills with fish. They can't haul it into the boat. It is probably more than the boat can hold, and even a swimmer in the water will not be a help because with the seven men in the boat, this catch would sink the boat.

Notice that it is John who puts these events together in an instant. This is John's gift; he is able to assimilate information and draw perceptive conclusions. As an example, at the empty tomb with only Jesus' clothes left behind, John is able to see the empty tomb and the clothes that Jesus had worn and state that seeing these things he believed. John's leadership style is

reflective. Here John puts together this large catch at an unexpected time and in an unlikely place at the direction of a stranger on the shore and realizes that this is Jesus talking to them, directing them, and helping them to be wildly successful with their single cast of the net. What they could not accomplish in a night of hard labor has been accomplished by listening to the voice of this stranger on the beach and casting the net following his direction. Their obedience to follow this stranger's guidance turns their night of fruitless labor into a bountiful catch, a catch beyond their expectation of hope. John then tells Peter "It is the Lord!" Peter, in his typical reactive leadership style, gets dressed and jumps out of the boat into the water and heads to shore. The text translated here is that Peter was naked. For a first century man to be naked in public is an oddity and would be very unusual. The best explanation I have found for Peter's lack of attire is that he is the designated "swimmer" who was to go into the water to get the fish out of the net and into the boat. He would be wearing a swimming robe for modesty. The dressing he does is to put on his under garments and then he jumps into the lake to get to Jesus. Peter has a very strong desire to be with Jesus. And, instead of working to get the catch and boat to shore, he abandons the others to the task and takes immediate action to get to Jesus. Jesus is here, Peter needs to get to Jesus, and so he jumps into the water, and goes to the Lord.

We should notice that John stays in the boat and brings the boat, catch, and the other disciples to shore. John's leadership style is reflective, and he sees a need to complete the task of fishing, to get everyone to shore, to get the boat to shore, and to preserve this great catch that is a gift from God. He will get everyone to Jesus, but will also complete the necessary tasks along the way.

When John and the boat of disciples finally arrive on shore, they see a charcoal fire with fish and bread. Jesus is with Peter. Our minds should be drawn to another charcoal fire where Peter denies that he knows Jesus, a charcoal fire where Peter failed the Lord and now needs to find healing and love of Jesus. This is part of the answer to why Jesus appears in Galilee to the disciples. There is healing needed for at least one of those present.

Jesus tells the disciples to bring some of the fish they have caught. Again, we see Peter react, maybe because he has been ashore longer, maybe because he is already wet from his swim, or maybe because that is how Peter leads. He acts! Peter goes to the boat, pulls the net from the boat and brings it to shore. Peter may have pulled the net through the shallows to a stone containment, common in fishing villages, where the fish could have been kept for later

processing. He would have transferred the fish from the net to the small area and would have had the opportunity to count them as he emptied the net. The benefits of this great catch would be available to help others. Just as once the loaves and fish left over were gathered up, so Peter gathers up the fish from this remarkable catch, to use this gift as a blessing for others.

When Peter is done tending to the catch, he returns to the group and Jesus invites them to “come and have breakfast.” This is an invitation to fellowship with Jesus around a meal. They do not need to ask who Jesus is. They all know and remember Jesus in the context of bread and fish, and they recognize his power in the catch of fish. The gift all of them receive is a time of table fellowship with Jesus. I would encourage us to find these times of table fellowship with other believers. We need to find those times to gather around a table and ask Jesus to bless our gathering and the time we spend together and the meal we share with his presence. At breakfast Jesus gives bread and fish to sustain and refresh the men from their long night of labor. They are witnesses to Jesus’ resurrected body and the gift of a catch that comes at Jesus’ direction.

Now our question as to why this third appearance is necessary is still an open question. The disciples know that Jesus is resurrected from his earlier appearances. They also have a growing understanding from the scriptures about Jesus’ suffering, death, and entry into glory. But why does Jesus appear here at the lakeshore to this group of disciples? One of the answers to our question is clearly that Peter is still struggling with his denial of Jesus, and that for Peter to be an effective leader in the church, he will need to be healed of the pain and hurt he carries. Without that healing, he will face insurmountable obstacles to ministry. We will look at Jesus’ and Peter’s interaction that follows this fellowship breakfast in detail in another sermon. For this morning, let me share that during this meal time and the discussion afterward, Jesus heals Peter’s pain and prepares him to be one filled with the Holy Spirit and able to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is healing that is available to all who have life circumstances that separate them from Jesus. Healing is available, mercy is abundant. John ends his description of this scene very abruptly, telling us that “this is the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples.” John wants us to catch something else.

One thing we should catch from this scene is the difference between Peter’s and John’s leadership styles. Peter is the reactive, impulsive one who quickly charges off into action. In this Galilean fishing trip, we see Peter in action, deciding to wait no longer and telling the others he is going fishing, getting into the boat, getting himself ready to get the catch out of the water,

jumping into the water, and swimming to shore so he can be with Jesus. At the same time, we see and can contrast John's leadership style in this fishing experience. John is reflective and follows Peter's lead to go fishing, but John is the one who is able to put together the large catch and the man on the beach and recognize Jesus. John is the one who stays with the boat and brings the catch, boat, and disciples safely to shore. John is the one who sits at breakfast, listens to Jesus, enjoys the fellowship with his risen Lord, and notices all that Jesus does and says. The point here is that we need both of these leadership styles in the church. There are times when we need a leader who is all about action. We also need the reflective leader in our midst who will pull together the available information and see Jesus on the shore. We need leaders who will work the details and bring home the miraculous catch and ensure that its benefits are made available to be used to care for needs. We need a range of leaders in our church who are committed to using their gifts and abilities to serve the risen Lord. As Christ's followers, we need to understand our gifts and match them to ministry so that ministry will be effective. We also need to respect the gifts that God has given to other people. If we were all reactive leaders, jumping into every new idea with unplanned actions, we would quickly find ourselves in great trouble. The same is true if we only have reflective people as our leaders. We would spend all of our time on the details and what they might mean and never get ministry underway. We would also have ministries that are started but then yield no fruit because there is no purposeful, reflective guidance to bring the boat to shore with a remarkable catch in tow. In this lakeside fishing event, we find a call from Jesus to all bring our gifts and abilities and make them available, putting them to use for the glory of God under Jesus' direction. We need to learn to recognize the gifts we have and the gifts those around us have and to put them to unified works in the kingdom of God.

Another answer to our questions found in this scripture is that without Jesus we will work hard, long, and focused, but will not catch fish. Keep in mind that catching fish in the New Testament is far less about fishing and far more about bringing people into the kingdom of God through a relationship with Jesus. Jesus is still standing on the lakeshore today asking us if we have any fish, are we bringing people into the kingdom? He is not asking this because he wants to know if we are effective, but because he knows that we have worked long in ministries and are tired, but are too often not working with him but in our own strength. We tend to head out to fish, to share the Gospel without waiting for Jesus. Like the disciples, we will have little success

until we are able to see Jesus, hear his voice, and obey his direction, and then fish with him in his mission. We are not to take Jesus with us where we think we are to go, but are to look for his direction, and when it comes, we are to be obedient and cast our net, working where he tells us to work. We have to be willing to wait on the Lord and listen for his voice to guide our efforts in ministry. When we do, we too will be blessed with a catch, not of fish, but of the lost for whom Jesus came, suffered, died, and entered into glory that they might become part of the kingdom of God. Here is where we need to be open to new directions from Jesus. We are not to fish when and where we think we will be successful, but to be willing to fish in the times and places where we know there are none to be caught, yet under Jesus' guidance, the net we cast, the ministry we work, will overflow with fruit.

Finally, we need to be willing to simply hear Jesus' call to come and join him in breakfast. He makes provisions for us. He is asking us to come and sit with him in times of fellowship and healing. We are too often too busy to simply sit with Jesus and enjoy the fellowship we can have with a risen Lord. We should learn to start our day with him, so he can sustain us throughout the day as we labor with him. We need to be willing to hear his voice and to seek to find him in the fellowship of his Church, the body of Christ, where we have been placed among other believers. There we also need to learn to simply sit and feast upon the bread and fish and enjoy a time of fellowship with Jesus. We may need to wait for him in the places he sends us, but if we will wait, Jesus will come and fellowship with us. Look for the quiet places where the Lord sends us to wait for him that we might be refreshed, healed, and prepared to go out into the world and work in his strength and power to be fishers of all humanity. Let's go fishing, fishing with Jesus.

Pray with me: Father, open us to use our gifts that you have graciously given to us for fishing for men. Lord, open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to love as you love us. Lord, help us to be obedient to wait for you and then at your direction, to cast our net in the places you direct so that we might be effective ministers. Amen.