



Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore,
full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there
were so many, the net was not torn. John 21:11

Jesus Reveals Himself on the Shore of the Sea

JOHN 21:1–14 ¹*After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon 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.*

⁴*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.*

⁹*When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just*

caught.”¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Within the overall structure of John’s gospel, this final chapter forms an epilogue to conclude the gospel, just as the prologue (1:1–18) had introduced the gospel. If the gospel had ended with 20:31, this would have provided sufficient closure, but this epilogue accomplishes several objectives: it resolves the seeming competition between Peter and the beloved disciple, showing that their roles are complementary within the early church, and it shows that the beloved disciple is the source of this gospel. Both prologue and epilogue frame the gospel so that they form an integral part of the overall theological and literary design of the entire narrative.

In this final appearance narrative, seven disciples have returned to Galilee. Like thousands of other pilgrims, they have come back home after the Passover festival in Jerusalem and resumed their familiar trade out on the sea they know so well. At Peter’s initiative, they get into the boat to fish, but they fail to make a catch all night. As the morning breaks, Jesus is standing on the shore, but the disciples do not realize it is Jesus because of his transcendent glory. The futility of the disciples’ efforts during the night, followed by their tremendous success in the morning light with Jesus present, continues the contrast between darkness and light so typical of this gospel. Without Jesus, the disciples catch nothing (verse 3); but with his direction, the catch is overwhelming (verse 6).

It would have been tempting for Peter and his friends to ignore the advice of Jesus. They had been fishing all night and must have been exhausted. But Jesus encourages them to give it another shot and to do it differently this time. The result is an overflowing net: “They were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.” The great catch occurs not just because the fish are there, but because the risen Lord is there with his authority and power. The

record-breaking catch is the catalyst for recognition. As in the scene at the tomb, the beloved disciple displays insightful recognition and says to Peter, “It is the Lord!” (verse 7). Peter exhibits decisive action: “He jumped into the sea” in order to swim ashore to Jesus.

The overwhelming catch symbolically represents the apostolic mission Jesus has given to his disciples. After the great catch in Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “From now on you will be catching people” (Luke 5:10). Based on the commentary of St. Jerome that holds there were 153 known varieties of fish at the time, the awesome number of “large fish” represents the universality and all-embracing character of the church’s mission (verse 11). The great catch is the symbolic equivalent of the great commission Jesus gave his followers at the end of Matthew’s gospel: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). These fishers of men and women are evangelizing the world and making disciples. Because of the presence and direction of Jesus, their mission is overwhelmingly successful. The fact that the net was not torn, despite the huge catch, expresses the unity of the church for which Jesus has prayed.

The risen Lord has prepared a “charcoal fire” (verse 9) upon which he has placed roasting fish and bread. Though reminding Peter of the charcoal fire outside the high priest’s house, these burning coals by the sea prepare a meal of communion and reconciliation. How different this fire must have looked to Peter in the light of dawn as the risen Lord invites the disciples to come and eat. The words and actions of Jesus echo his earlier meal of thanksgiving with the loaves and fish (6:11, 23) and reflect the eucharistic meals of the church in which the disciples in every age encounter the risen Christ.

Reflection and discussion

- In what ways does fishing represent the mission Jesus gave to his disciples?

- How does the net full of fish symbolize the hoped-for result of the church's mission in the world?

- How does the sight of the charcoal fire affect the emotions of Peter? What does it symbolize in light of the resurrection?

- In what ways have I experienced the presence and guidance of Jesus making my work successful and fruitful?

Prayer

Risen Jesus, give me the insight and faith to recognize your presence today. Bring your light into my darkness, give me confidence in my work, and give me the love I need to accomplish the mission you give to me this day.