

John 21:1-19
But Wait, There's More!
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
4-10-16

In the last century, we've seen some of the most groundbreaking innovations in human history. The invention of the automobile, the onset of space travel, the personal computer, and the iPod are unmatched in their impact and scope. People like Henry Ford, Steve Jobs, and Elon Musk are the renaissance men of our day.

But there is one man who, arguably, has done more to change our lives than any other. It's this man. Ron Popeil, the founder of Ronco, has been cluttering our kitchens and closets since 1970, and has brought us such indispensable products like Chop-O-Matic, Hair in a can, and the Popeil Pocket Fisherman. But of the things he has brought to our lives, maybe none is more memorable than the infamous late-night infomercial slogan, "but wait, there's more."

What I'd like to do this morning is reclaim this phrase from the marketers. Because the original "But wait, there's more" moment was that first Easter. You see, the disciples thought that when Jesus was arrested that it was over; but wait, there's more. When they hung Jesus on the cross, the Jews and the Roman authority thought it was over; but wait, there's more. When the family took his body off the cross and laid it in a borrowed tomb and rolled a stone in front of it, they thought it was over; but wait, there's more. And when Jesus appeared in the upper room, turning doubters into believers, they thought now it's over; but wait, there's more.

John's Gospel could have ended with chapter 20. The closing verses of chapter 20 read like this: **Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.**

That sounds like a very reasonable place to close... but wait, there's more. So at the risk of this message sounding like a glorified infomercial, I want to talk about Jesus' one final flourish of grace, one last touch of mercy. John 21 is an epilogue of sorts, written to us as one last word of hope. These verses are written from the teacher to his most passionate and earnest disciple, Peter.

Now, the previous chapters have been a dizzying experience for the followers of Jesus. The sadness of Good Friday is interrupted abruptly when news of the empty tomb hits. Say what? Then Jesus' friends all get together that evening to discuss and out of nowhere Jesus comes to be with them. Then he disappears for another week, only to pop up again to prove to Doubting Thomas that it was true.

He's alive, he's dead, he's alive, he's dead. He's here, he's not here. It was all pretty overwhelming to Peter. So what does Peter do in this next chapter? He goes fishing. Fishing is kind of his thing. Throughout the gospels, when the going gets tough, Peter goes fishing.

Some people have a hard time with this. How could it be, after two memorable experiences of seeing the risen Jesus, not to mention being given a direct order to "go into the world and make disciples" that Peter would then go and waste time fishing?

Peter had a rough last few days with Jesus. He made promises that he didn't keep, he turned his back when Jesus needed him, and Peter had fallen hard and his feelings of depression came from his denial. So what does he do with these loose ends, these unresolved feelings? He returned to the thing that defined his life BC (before Christ). If I can't be a good follower of Jesus, then at least I can be a good fisherman.

Sometimes I think we're too hard on Peter. In fact, I think this is a reasonable response, one that any one of us might choose, as well. Genuine, transformative encounters with Jesus do this, they take time. It takes time for us to make sense of things, for the pieces to fit together in a person's life, especially if we are going to find freedom in our discipleship. Here at Wabash Presbyterian Church, our goal is to love people with the heart of Jesus in the heart of Wabash. And I think that when our goal is to live like Jesus, it takes time for God to sand off the sharp edges. Genuine transformation doesn't just happen when you pray the sinner's prayer or come down to the altar, any more than walking into the YMCA and saying "I'm going to get fit" makes you a healthier person.

Now, does giving our lives to Jesus initiate that experience of grace? Of course. But the fullness doesn't come until it begins to take root. Becoming the person God is intending you to be is a daily decision to get up and keep loving, keep forgiving, keep serving, keep seeking, keep praying. Discipleship is a distance race and not a sprint. And, of course, there are going to be days when you don't have anything left in the tank and all you want to do is go back to fishing. For the victory of Easter to become real to Peter, it needed time to sink in and become Peter's victory, too!

Being a church that loves people like Jesus, also means we take the long view when it comes to that journey of transformation. It means getting in the boat with each other. Remaining with each other when our faith is weak. It also means alerting each other to God in our midst when we don't have eyes to see. This is the second point I want to make. When Jesus called to them from the shore, it wasn't even Peter who knew that it was Jesus—he was still sort of clueless. It was the Beloved Disciple who proclaimed, "It is the Lord" (*ho kyrios estin*). Even when we can't see God at work in our situation, it is our job as a church to say to one another *ho kyrios estin*, "it is the Lord."

Thomas didn't believe, and the disciples stayed with him in his doubt. Peter doesn't recognize God's presence in this situation, but thank goodness someone else does. Life can weigh us down, it can block our view, it can keep us from recognizing the hope that is out in front of us because we can't recognize it at the moment. But it is up to us to remind each other, "It is the Lord."

There is a wonderful scene in the classic allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the main character Christian is trying to get to the celestial city. And at every step of the road, he faces obstacles and has to overcome, always with the help of another. This, of course, is a metaphor for the life of one who follows Jesus. But there is one scene in particular that is really powerful. Christian and his friend Hopeful are trying to cross the river that stands between them and their destination, when he begins to sink down. **"I am sinking in deep waters; the billows are going over my head, all his waves go over me."** And calling out to his friend, Hopeful says, **"Be of good cheer, my brother. I feel the bottom, and it is good."**

When one of us doesn't recognize Jesus' voice calling, it's up to us to say *ho kyrios estin* (It is the Lord.) A few months ago, a friend called me with the difficult news that his marriage was in turmoil. These are the phone calls that always leave you with that pit in your stomach. So the following day,

we met in my office. This was a man who had been through a lot in life and had recently begun to look to God for direction and purpose. We sat there and I listened as he shared how God was working on him, softening him, leading him to repentance, guiding him through the sometimes painful process of transformation.

“I genuinely feel like I had turned a corner in my spiritual life. But this seems to have derailed me. I just can’t make sense of why this is happening.”

I think deflection or distraction is one of the enemy’s most effective tools for discouragement. (SCREWTAPE LETTERS). This young man was growing deep in his walk of faith, he was getting involved in church and finding community. And when this happened, he and I spend the next several meetings just sitting together and processing the feelings he was experiencing. And with each meeting, whether it was in my office over coffee or on my front step after the kids were in bed, all I could do is remain and point to God, *ho kyrios estin* ‘it is the Lord’ he is still here.

Something happened recently. Even though the marriage tragically ended, my friend has gone through a radical transformation. He is growing more deeply with God, getting involved in his church, he is absolutely devouring books on theology and spirituality. He has walked through that time of struggle and is now finding true freedom in Christ.

In fact, the other day he called because he needed more book recommendations. “Jonathan, I’ve gone through 7 books this month alone, I can’t get enough.” This friend is bringing in a monumental catch, he’s landing the trophy catch. But this miracle is not for his family, it’s not for those around him, the miracle that’s taking place in this man’s life is for him.

Every time in John’s Gospel that the disciples saw Jesus perform miracle, he was either doing something for a crowd of hungry, sick people or he was commissioning them to do something for the crowd. So when Peter and the other disciples saw the miracle of the net full of fish, they may have just assumed that Jesus was back in the business of gathering the crowds.

When all the disciples got to shore, however, they just found Jesus standing alone by a small campfire. He has warm bread and fish ready for them. They had to remember the last time Jesus held bread and fish and multiplied it for a crowd. But this time there was no crowd – there was just Jesus with a small meal for his few disciples.

“Bring your fish over here.” So Peter charges back to the boat and begins to drag the net to shore. Interesting, John knows exactly how many there were: 153 large fish. Over the centuries, this number has played an important role in our interpretation of scripture. Why is it so specific? Some have suggested that 153 represents the number of species of fish, others have done interpretive gymnastics to come up with numeric theories of its meaning. I think that the exactness of it actually makes this account more reliable. This is Master’s Weekend, and last year my dad and brother and I checked off a bucket list experience by traveling to Augusta. I can recount that experience with specific detail, down to the number of Pimento Cheese Sandwiches I ate that day...9.

But the exactness is not necessarily for us, it’s not a miracle for the crowds; the miracle was for Peter and the disciples.

This miracle was not meant for the poor, for the crippled, for the outcast; this was a miracle for them. Sometimes we forget that Jesus cares about us individually. We pray for Iraq, we pray for Syria, we pray for Belgium, and we're meant to. But this is a miracle that reminds us that Jesus cares about our concerns, as well. The miracle here is not the 153 fish, the miracle is that Peter, the disciples, and you and I can know Jesus intimately.

John's Gospel begins with this magisterial telling of the creation of the cosmos by the Logos, by the Word. And it ends with Jesus the Logos sitting on the beach by a campfire cooking breakfast with his friends.

This is the miracle of the gospel: the Savior cares for you. He knows you had hopes for what he would do, that he has not done. He knows that you are confused about his work, and maybe about yours. He knows that some nights you're exhausted because after all your hard work you have nothing to show. Even your fall back plan isn't working. He knows, and he cares. This is the Savior who is God with us.

There is a world of need around you, and when we're at the end of our ropes, when we've done everything we can for God and are looking for where to go next, God has one last word. But wait, there's more! That last word is a reminder that the God of the Cosmos is also as close to us as a friend. He's the God who says, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heaven burdens and I will give you rest." The world doesn't need our frustration or your exhaustion. What they need is the joy, hope, and love that is found only by disciples who know how to commune with a Savior.

Amen.