

Jesus Appears on the Beach
John 21:1-19
Third Sunday of Easter, Year C May 4, 2025
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Good morning, friends, and welcome to worship on this Third Sunday of Easter. Recall from last week as we explored John 20:19-31 that Jesus had appeared to his disciples the evening of Easter, though Thomas was not with them. We also learned that a week later he returned to the disciples' hiding place; this time Thomas was present. Having missed Jesus' visit on Easter, Thomas had demanded tangible proof that the mysterious visitor was actually Jesus. When Jesus visited the second week, Thomas didn't touch Jesus' wounds as he said he had wanted to do, but rather confessed the Jesus was his Lord and his God (20:28).

John 20 ended with what seemed to be a closing statement concerning the purpose of this Gospel: so that people "may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). Well, this certainly seems to be the end of the story, but as we see today, John or someone else close to him penned another chapter comprised of 25 verses. We'll be exploring the first 19 of them, which deal with Jesus' post-resurrection appearances on the beach at the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee.

As we turn this week to chapter 21 of John, we find Jesus again appearing to his disciples. You'll note in verse 2 that only seven disciples are mentioned here. There is no indication of what happened to the other four. It is to this group that Peter announces that he is going fishing. The reason for Peter's announcement is unclear, but it does seem as if in his state of grief and uncertainty he is turning to what he knows best, namely, fishing. I think something else is going on here as well. Recall that Jesus tells those who he has chosen to be his closest companions that they will be fishing for people. To phrase this commission another way, they are being called to share the good news of Jesus with others so that those who say yes to him may enter into a new way of life in his name. A fishing expedition is symbolic of their mission to bring people to Jesus.

Notice in chapter 21, verse 3, John simply declares that he is going fishing. Although he doesn't specifically invite them to join him, those who are with him state that they're going too. Peter isn't going alone. That seems like an important point for us to consider. First, when we mourn, we are not alone. Others share in our sorrow and support us. Second, the fact that the group wants to go together reminds us that our Christian walk is not solitary either. We are not spiritual Lone Rangers, so we walk with the rest of the church, the body of Christ. We love, support, and care for one another, just as Jesus' first disciples were doing.

Although these professional fishermen likely set out with expectations of a good catch, that night they came up empty (21:3). As one who doesn't fish, I've wondered why those who ply their trade on the Sea of Galilee are usually out at night. With a bit of research, I learned that in the dark fish were less likely to avoid the nets used in Jesus' time, thereby leading to a larger catch. Moreover, some species of fish were more active and fed at night, which also helped to make work in the evening more productive. Remember that Peter and company were not out for sport. Fishing was their livelihood, so they needed to work efficiently.

In verses 4-8, we learn that just after daybreak a man was standing on the beach. This figure

was Jesus, but the disciples apparently didn't recognize him. Perhaps the fact that he knew they had not caught anything should have given away his identity. But like the two on the road to Emmaus who didn't know their companion was Jesus, neither did the fishermen, at least not until the disciple Jesus loved recognized him and said, "It is the Lord" (21:7).

The unknown figure on the beach told them to throw the net over the right side of the boat. They did so and must have been amazed to snag so many fish that they couldn't haul them into the boat. The disciples counted their super-abundant catch: 153 fish in total (21:11). Perhaps they recalled a previous fishing trip recorded in Luke 5:1-11 (which we examined on February 9) that also resulted in an extraordinary catch. Whatever the trigger, Peter got so excited that he put on clothes to hide his nakedness and make himself more presentable to Jesus. He then jumped into the sea and headed for the beach.

Being only about one hundred yards from land, the other disciples remained with the boat, dragging the heavily-laden net back to shore. Miraculously, the net was intact and had not torn under the weight of this huge catch (John 21:6).

Arriving at the beach, the disciples saw a charcoal fire where fish and bread were cooking. We have to wonder if the charcoal aroma prompted Peter to recall standing at a fire warming himself as Jesus was being interrogated at the home of the high priest (18:12-18). It was here that Peter denied his Lord three times, just as Jesus had said he would (13:36-38; 18:25-27). We don't know what Peter was thinking, but we do know that he responded to Jesus' request to bring fish and to have breakfast with him. The disciples knew this was Jesus with them on the beach. This was, in fact, the third time that Jesus had appeared in recognizable bodily form to his friends after God raised him from the dead (21:14). This appearance on the beach was also the final time that we see Jesus in his resurrected state in the Gospel of John.

Wouldn't you have been excited to eavesdrop on the conversation between Jesus and his disciples? I know that would have been a thrilling privilege for me. I have to wonder what kinds of questions the disciples asked. And what was Jesus saying? Was he continuing to teach them? Did he give them further directions for ministry? Or did they simply exchange pleasantries and enjoy each other's company?

We don't know, but what we do know is that after breakfast, Jesus had a serious talk with Peter. It was actually more of a Q and A (question and answer) than a talk. Jesus asked three times about Peter's love for him. By the third time, Peter was hurt that Jesus would even ask him. Nevertheless, he gave a very positive response: Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. And in response to Peter's affirmation of love, Jesus told him to feed my sheep and tend my lambs.

What's going on here? As we pointed out, Peter had denied Jesus three times. Here, Jesus has asked three questions that apparently lead to Peter's restoration. I trust we can all take comfort in this exchange. At some time or another, we have likely let Jesus down. We've failed to show our love for him and/or for our neighbor. We have ignored his call on our lives or flat out said no. We've put our own desires first and failed to obey him. It seems to me that if Jesus can forgive and restore Peter after he denied the Lord three times, then there is hope for the rest of us. Jesus did not come to condemn us, but rather has come offering salvation and eternal life to those who repent and believe in his name. That was good news for Peter—and it's good news for us as well!

Jesus concluded his conversation with Peter by telling him how he would die a martyr's death. Peter, who had moved about freely, will be bound and crucified ("stretch out your

hands, 21:18). His death would also glorify God, just as Jesus' death had done.

Jesus ended with the words "follow me." (21:19). As we've seen in recent weeks, we cannot replicate the stories and actions associated with Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances. However, we can and must respond to his call to "follow me."

So just what does that entail? It seems pretty clear from the encounter between Jesus and Peter that following Jesus requires us to feed and tend his sheep. To do this, Peter—and any disciple—needs to show great love for Jesus. Yes, we need to act out of love, but what exactly should we do?

Jesus has called Peter to be a shepherd. We often think of the pastor as the shepherd of the flock. The word "pastor" actually comes from the Latin word for "shepherd." But I would not want to limit who can be a shepherd. I think that each in our own way, using the gifts, talents, and other resources we've been given, is called to the role of the shepherd as well. Here's some examples of what shepherds do. I think you'll find that these roles can be taken on by laity as well as by clergy.

Jesus tells us to feed his sheep. So, obviously, a major role of the shepherd is to provide spiritual nourishment. At the top of the list, then, is sharing the word of God. A pastor most likely does this through preaching sermons. Different pastors construct their sermons in different ways, but I hope that my general pattern of explaining the meaning of the Scriptures, offering examples of how what we've read can be applied to your day-to-day life, and then challenging you to grow in your faith will provide you with the bread of life.

But you don't have to be a pastor to share this bread. I imagine many of you can remember a special Sunday school teacher who was also able to unpack the Scriptures and prompt you to grow in your faith. Youth leaders also can play such a role.

Admittedly, reading, writing, and public speaking may not be your thing. But there are many ways that we can show the love of Jesus in action. For example, can you cook—or get carry out? If so, you can help someone who needs a meal. Can you drive and assist someone as he gets in and out of the car? If so, you could volunteer to take someone to a medical appointment or shopping or perhaps just out for a pleasant afternoon. In the course of whatever you're doing, you can certainly talk about how God is active in your life.

Sometimes people best experience the love of Jesus when others care for them in prayer. Is there a group or individual that needs to know you are praying for them? If so, take their prayer requests seriously and pray for them often.

In addition to providing spiritual nourishment, another broad category of activity that the one who is caring for the flock needs to embrace is leadership. I'm always fascinated to see on television how a shepherd, using commands and whistles, can guide a dog to herd the sheep in the right direction. I sometimes think of myself as a sheep dog. God is the shepherd, but I need to obey all the whistles and commands I hear so that I can move the flock where they need to go. Anyone giving lay or clerical leadership in the church needs to be as tuned in to God and her congregation as the dog in the field is to his flock and master.

The touching parable of the shepherd going after the one sheep and leaving the 99 behind teaches us much about what it means to be a shepherd who loves Jesus. The shepherd is always ready to care for the vulnerable. If I had to choose one thing that I think the Choptank Charge does extremely well, I'd say we know how to care for the least, the last, and the lost. We don't have unlimited funds to help end a health crisis like malaria, for example, but we do

have the money and culinary skills to ensure that everyone at the cold weather shelter gets a delicious hot meal when it's Antioch's turn to serve each month. Likewise, we can contribute to meet the financial needs of the shelter, as well as those of the Overflow Café Ministries. And some of you have stepped up to offer your services at the Café, where everyone who participates in its operation is a volunteer.

We also do a good job of caring for people who need support and encouragement. Perhaps they have no family to lean on, but for whatever reason need help. Like a good neighbor, we can stand with those who may have psychological or social needs, needs that cannot be met with money or tangible goods! I've heard from folks who wouldn't ask for help, but who were grateful to answer a knock at the door from someone offering them a hot casserole. Or people who have missed worship for several weeks expressing appreciation for cards or phone calls that let them know they had been missed.

All in all, the good shepherd tries to model the love of Jesus, both within the church and beyond its walls in the community. As Peter and anyone who has taken this responsibility seriously can attest, this is not easy work. John Wesley's Covenant Prayer, which participants in the Thursday afternoon Bible study group will explore in May, is an excellent guide for shepherds and all followers of Christ. Study and pray the prayer this week.

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.