

It Is the Lord
John Chapter 21
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The Gospel of John finishes with a powerful story about seeing and believing, and believing and seeing. Jesus has risen from the dead. The tomb in the garden is empty. Mary found out the one she thought was the gardener happened to be the one she was searching for, her heart's desire. Jesus was alive. Jesus was in the garden. And he was calling her name.

From there Jesus appears to his disciples, and they all see him except Thomas. Wouldn't you hate to be the one who stepped out of the room to run an errand and you missed it when Jesus, the resurrected Jesus showed up? Poor Thomas. No matter how much the other disciples tried to convince him Jesus had risen from the dead and appeared to them, he wouldn't believe it. He said, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hand into his side." A week later the disciples were together, and this time Thomas was with them. Jesus appears. He holds out his hands. He says to Thomas, "Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." To his credit Thomas dumps his doubts and embraces the risen Christ. "My Lord and my God." Thomas, the one who wouldn't believe unless he could see, gives Jesus the opportunity to include into his family a whole host of people, the ones who were not there to see the things Thomas and the other disciples saw, but even though they were not there, even though they didn't see, they believed.

Following that final encounter with Thomas, the Gospel of John concludes with words that encourage us, the ones who were not there to see it, nevertheless to be ones who believe. "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30, 31) It really seems at this point the Gospel of John has come to an end. The story is over. Let's close the book. But no, there's more. The story isn't over. There is something else to tell. There is literally an afterward. The word "Afterward" begins a new chapter in the Gospel of John, the 21st chapter. I love that about Easter. I love that about the resurrection. I love that about God. I love that about Jesus. The story is never over. Once you let him out of the tomb, once he has been raised from the dead, the story is never over. Jesus keeps showing up.

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So 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 did not recognize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."

Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:1-14) Just when you thought it was safe to go in the water...Jesus shows up again. What a glorious event. Once you let Jesus out of the tomb, he just keeps showing up over and over again.

The story of Jesus appearing to the disciples doesn't have much in the way of explanation. It all just happens. And yet it sure is an interesting story. Jesus has risen from the dead and all Peter can think to do is to go fishing. You can't help but wonder if he thought the Gospel of John ended with chapter 20. Well, that was sure an interesting ride with Jesus, but now it's over, and time to get back to work. "I'm going out to fish." Peter might not know it yet, but his life will never be normal again. Once you let Jesus out of the tomb, life will never be the same.

They went out to fish but they caught nothing. Had all the disciples closed the Gospel of John at chapter 20? Some wonder if the meaning of them catching nothing all night is that they were out trying to do things by themselves, trusting their own abilities, their own powers, their own wisdom, their own skills, as if Jesus was no longer part of the equation. That's not going to work. They caught nothing.

Then this guy stands on shore and gives them advice. “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some fish.” Well, sure enough the disciples were fishing on the wrong side of the boat. They were trying to do it in their own power and their own experience and their own skills, and that is the wrong side of the boat. Let Jesus be in charge. Let Jesus be in control. Then you’re fishing on the right side of the boat. When they threw their nets on the right side of the boat they were not able to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

And then it happened. The guy standing on the shore, with that amazing ability to forecast which side of the boat to fish from, the guy no one recognized...all of a sudden the light goes on. “It is the Lord!” Did you think you were going to close the Gospel of John after chapter 20? Did you think Jesus was done showing up? There he is right there on the shore, grinning and smiling as the disciples finally figure it out. “It is the Lord!” Peter bolts from the boat and swims to shore while the others race in with the big haul of fish. That must have been such a sweet reunion. A fire was already burning, the coals were glowing, some fish were already cooking, and there was bread.

Nothing gets explained, but loaves and fishes...bread that is broken... Easter is never over. Every time loaves are broken and words are spoken, he shows up. Every time two or more gather in his name, he shows up. And to call his disciples friends, that is a word fraught with meaning in the Gospel of John. In the midst of the long discourse Jesus had with his disciples on the night he was betrayed he said, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” From the shore he calls out to his disciples and he calls them friends. Friends. What meaning is attached to that simple word, the word—friends. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Those hands that stoked the fire, that turned the fish, that broke the bread...those hands in John 21 were the same hands as in John 20, when Thomas had looked at them and saw the scars from the nails. Friends, he said to them. And his hands proved it. Jesus had laid down his life for his friends. Greater love has no one than that.

I wonder what other friends Jesus meets on the seashore, on the sandy beaches? I can see him sitting with someone who is forlorn. I can see him sitting with someone who feels forsaken. Jesus sits down next to this person, maybe a man, maybe a woman, maybe a child, maybe someone older...maybe you, and maybe me. Just like the disciples we can’t recognize him. I can see Jesus sitting down next to a person who just feels like life has been too much for them. The burdens have outweighed the blessings. The sorrows have swallowed up the celebrations.

Seeking some sign of hope they came to the beach for a long walk, but even that long walk has only served to add to that deep feeling of loneliness. Somewhere they had heard a promise that God would walk with them on the journey of life. Staring at the beach the person is able to see their own footprints in the sand, but that is all they see. Shouldn't there be two sets of footprints. Wasn't God supposed to be a constant companion? Jesus comes up and sits down. He listens to the litany of lost hope. And when attention is drawn to the one set of footprints...you can see how someone wrote that beautiful poem. Jesus says, "When you see just one set of footprints, that is when God carried you." Then, without another word, Jesus picks the person up and carries them over to a fire, a fire burning bright and giving warmth. As he sets them down Jesus whispers, "I will never leave you. I will never forsake you. Sit here with me and let me ease your burden. I am your friend."

The other day a woman called the church and asked if I could conduct a small memorial service. Her brother had died and they were looking for a pastor who would help them out. They didn't need to use our sanctuary, because the brother's wishes were that his service would take place at the beach. So on a Saturday morning a group of about twenty folks gathered at Town Beach, looked out at the water, the sand, the waves, the horizon, and we said some prayers and read a few passages from the Bible. It was the Saturday of Easter weekend. It was Saturday, and the very next day would be Sunday, Easter Sunday.

As we looked at the ocean and the waves and the sand and the shore I reminded the people who had gathered to mourn that Jesus had been with his disciples on rough waters and he knew how to calm the storms. And then on that Saturday before Easter I told them of this little story in the Gospel of John, this little story that happens afterward, after we thought the Gospel was done. I reminded them of this story where Jesus was on the shore and his disciples rushed to be with him. What a glorious reunion, Jesus and his friends. At a time of death our thoughts ran to the image of another shore, of Jesus being there, and this man who had died being welcomed to that other shore, being joined with Jesus, and a glorious reunion of loved ones. That image is incredibly comforting. I believe it speaks of a reality that is true. I believe it speaks of a reality we can trust.

At the same time, I think I missed an opportunity that day, to say something important to the ones who had gathered to mourn the death of a loved one. I talked about the other shore, and how Jesus is there to welcome us. What I forgot to tell them is that Jesus is here on this shore, in this life. I forgot to tell them it was on a shore in this life that he had made a fire and was handing out fish and breaking bread. I forgot to tell them that there is a reunion on this side of heaven, because even when we think Easter is over, it is never really over. Life is never normal again. Jesus is walking this beach, and he wants to welcome us now, today. He wants to show us his hands. He wants to let us know he is alive. He wants to let us know he is with us. He wants to call us friend.

This coming Saturday we will have a memorial service for Joy Storm. Her death was quite a loss for our church. Her death was quite a loss, because her life was such a blessing. Last summer Joy must have had a sense that her time was drawing near, for she started to do some things she wanted to do, but often put off because other things were more urgent. One of the things she started to do was to go to the beach. When I saw her, it was late in the afternoon, when the crowds had thinned out. When I saw her she was with a friend. It was really sweet to see Joy and her friend sitting together. I don't know what was on her mind, but I do know the last thing I heard Joy say, in response to things she might want included in her memorial service, was that she wanted us to sing, "How Great Thou Art." Maybe on the beach, considering the gift of life, maybe that song was in her heart. If you know the last verse, it speaks of Christ coming again and taking us home. Kind of like that beautiful shore on the other side.

Before the last verse, there is the second to last verse. That second to last verse speaks about Jesus and what he did for us. "And when I think that God his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in. That on the cross my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee, how great Thou art, how great Thou art." Is it too much to believe that when Joy was at the beach she was with a friend? She was always with a friend, if we don't close up the Gospel of John after the 20th chapter. There he is in chapter 21, on the shore, on the beach, calling out to the ones he died for, calling them friends. I'm sure he made his way up from the water to sit with Joy, to show her his hands, and to call her friend.

We have a special friend here at Dunn's Corners, who really has been a friend to just about every one of us. Her name is Pat Rychlec. Pat is walking her own path with cancer, and she uses a phrase to let us know she is trusting in God. She says, "The Big Guy's got this." A week ago Friday Pat put up a post on Facebook. I told her I thought it was about the best sermon a person could preach about Easter. She wrote:

As most of you know, my posts have been about my cancer journey with Friday updates. But today on Good Friday I'd like to do something a little different... through my cancer journey my mantra has been "The Big Guy's got this" or "The Big Guy's still got this". I just want to clarify that this is not a glib statement but means a whole lot more. Whether you know me as Pat, Patty, Patricia, Trish, Tricia or Tex, the belief in the statement of the Big Guy's (aka God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit) got this is firmly rooted in my faith in Him. It's not just during this cancer chapter that I believe in Him. He has been blessing me throughout my life even during those times I ignored His presence. Luckily, I found my way back many years ago (thank you Katey

and Sam for getting me back to church) and have a best friend for literally ever...as in eternally!! I have been blessed throughout this journey we call life in more ways than I can count....but have to include blessed by a wonderful family, wonderful friends, a wonderful church family, especially the youth group, a great job... well you get the idea..., I've been blessed even when I didn't realize it at the time and I've definitely been blessed during the cancer journey with so much support, so many prayers and so much love. Without the Big Guy, I don't know how I would have gotten through this...on this remembrance of a Friday over 2000 years ago when Jesus sacrificed himself for all of mankind, I believe it's important to recognize Him...on Sunday we Christians will celebrate His Resurrection at Easter, giving us all victory over deathgranting us Eternal Life...I know I've gone a little long this Friday but would like to end my post with the chorus of one of my favorite hymns..."Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives all (most of it anyway) fear is gone. Because I know He holds the future, and life is worth the living just because He lives." Have a happy and blessed Easter!!! And thanks for all your support...it's made a huge difference.

Now I get it. I used to see Pat at the beach. I figured she was just out getting some sun, enjoying the waves. Now I know she was out having some quiet time with the Big Guy. And did you notice in her wonderful message, she said, "I've got a best friend." She knows the Jesus who hangs out at the beach and who calls out to us, "Friend." He calls us friend. He shows us his hands, the scars, the place where the nails pierced his skin, and he calls us friends. "Greater love has no one than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends."

That is the Jesus of John 21. The Gospel doesn't end at chapter 20. You just can't close the book on Jesus. He keeps showing up. What a perfect hymn for a God who is alive. "Because he lives, I can face tomorrow. Because he lives, all fear is gone. Because I know I he holds the future and life is worth the living just because he lives." I hope you have many, many, many moments when your eyes are opened, when you see through the fog, when the light goes on, and when you recognize it is Jesus. He is here. He is alive. I hope you have many, many, many moments when you cry out with joy and adoration and praise, "It is the Lord!"