

"A Fish Tale"

Alex had a terrible day fishing on the lake, sitting in the blazing sun all day without catching a single one. On his way home, he stopped at the market and ordered four rainbow trout. He told the manager of the fish department, "Pick four large ones out and throw them at me, will you?" "Why do you want me to throw them at you?" asked the salesman. "So that I am able to tell my wife, in all honesty, that I caught them." said Alex. "Okay, but I suggest that you take the salmon." "Why?" the fisherman asked. "Because your wife called earlier and said that if you came by, she would rather have salmon for dinner."

Anyone with a fisherman in our family has heard a fish tale or two in your lifetime but can you imagine listening to the disciples who returned home after this post-resurrection fish fry on the beach. If you were a fly on the wall in Peter's home, you might hear something like this: "We fished all night without a bite and then a stranger came by and told us to cast our nets on the other side of the boat. We figured – what the hay – we have nothing to lose – and honey you wouldn't believe it. There were 153 fish in the net – one of every kind in the Sea of Tiberius!" I can hear Peter's wife now: "Oy ve Peter! You've been in the sun too long. The last week has finally caught up with you!"

And of course, that wasn't even the REAL fish tale. The rest of the story was that the recently crucified Christ was the stranger who told them to give it one more try and then to top it all off had breakfast waiting for them on the beach.

Jesus must have been looking for these seven disciples for a reason. After all, no one just "ran in to" the resurrected Christ. He appeared to Mary Magdalene, the two on the road to Emmaus and the other disciples on his terms, in his timing. And it wasn't until his followers

SAW him that they actually believed. But WE are expected to believe without seeing. So what is it about this fish tale that can help US in our faith journey?

The first thing that is important to us today is to realize that Jesus met the disciples where they were. In fact, Jesus basically sought out the disciples and initiated the conversation with them. I believe this tells us that the Lord will come to us when we need him most and reveal himself in ways that relate to our present circumstances. God knows the human heart and God alone knows what it takes to get the attention of his followers.

This means that even though we may not physically see Christ, God still comes to us when we stumble across just the verse of Scripture that we need to hear in a magazine article or on a church sign. God speaks to us from the words of the choir when the sermon does not touch our hearts. Jesus comforts us through the shoulder of a friend or an unexpected smile from a stranger. God encourages us in a kind word or admonishes us when a friend has the courage to speak the truth in love.

In other words, God comes to US even when WE are not trying to seek God. I read once that the last verse of that beloved Psalm that we heard earlier is better translated from the original Hebrew as "Surely goodness and shall CHASE AFTER ME all the days of my life." What a comfort to know that when I am too tired or angry or confused or grief stricken to seek my Heavenly Father, that God will not leave me in my time of need. God will come to me, just as Jesus came to the disciples on the shore that day, in a way that assures me of God's presence.

And let's take a look at WHO was there because these men were ultimately to be the charter members of God's church. First there is Thomas, known as doubting Thomas. Thomas was not present when the resurrected Christ appeared to the other disciples and said, when he heard the news, "Until I SEE him and put my fingers in his wounds, I will not believe." Then

there is Peter, the denier. The one who spoke before he thought. The one who proclaimed allegiance to the Christ in one breath and said he didn't know him in the next. James and John were there too. They had been known to completely miss the point of one of Jesus' most important sermons because they were busy arguing about which one was better than the other.

This tells us that the first church was made up of doubters, deniers and sinners of all kinds. That is to say, normal people like you and me. And this tells me that the resurrected Christ meets us where we are and uses us **DESPITE** our doubts and fears and sinfulness to bring others into His kingdom. Indeed, Christ can use **ANYONE, ANY TIME**, even when we don't know it.

The pastoral care professor in seminary told us once the story of being in the hospital late one night. Walking down the hall in semidarkness, with no people around, suddenly a man ran out of one of the patient rooms. He ran up to my professor – whom he had never seen – grabbed him by the shoulders and with joy in his voice said, “”She’s going to make it! She’s going to be okay! She’s going to get better!” He said, “I’d never seen the man nor have I seen him since. I don’t know who he was talking about but clearly, it was someone near and dear to him. He had just received good news and couldn’t wait to share it with anyone who would listen.” That story shows how God uses people to share good news without even knowing it!

But even more relevant to us today, this fish tale teaches us that God can redeem our failures and turn them into successes. We don't know why the disciples did not catch any fish that day. Maybe they were not really giving it their best efforts. After all, they had just lived through a terrible ordeal and thought they had lost the one person that they could hang all their hope on. They had to be exhausted, confused and afraid at best.

Some would say that they simply did what all of us do when we lose someone we love and that is - get back into the swing of things. The disciples were fishermen and so they were going to fish. Just like a wife who has lost her husband must eventually get back to the laundry or a child who has lost a parent must ultimately go back to school. It is how we survive. We pick up and move on and these close friends of Jesus were no exception. But maybe they were still unable to put their whole hearts into their work – which is so understandable.

Maybe their lack of fish was not caused by anything they did or did not do but simply due to circumstances beyond their control. Too much wind, waters that were too warm, distractions by other boats. Whatever the cause, Jesus helped his followers realize that on their own, they could do nothing, just as we cannot succeed without the guidance and blessings of God. This story is such a strong reminder that God will always do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, in order for God's will to be fulfilled.

A friend of mine called once and asked me to pray because she had a job interview. When I asked her what I should pray for, I assumed she would say to pray that she got the job. But instead she said, "If it is God's will, pray that God blesses me with success. If it is not God's will, pray that God blesses me with failure." What a faithful prayer. One that I have since used often.

Of course, I prayed in just that way and my friend did *not* get the job. And do you know that less than a year later, her husband was diagnosed with stage 3 colorectal cancer. She was able to keep his business afloat and take care of him while he successfully battled cancer, something she would not have had the time to do in a new job. God was blessing and guiding her even when her circumstances seemed hopeless.

And in this fish tale, Jesus not only turned the disciples' failure into success, he then fed and fellowshiped with them. Think about the wonderful scene that greeted the weary fishermen. Here they were, unable to provide even food for themselves and their families, about to sit down to a big breakfast courtesy of their Lord!

And when you think about it, the cross of Calvary and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday is a fish tale in and of itself. Our Lord took the failure of our sinful ways and our desires to worship ourselves and turned that into the greatest success story of all time – the redemption of humankind through the life, death and resurrection of his only Son.

Now, this part of the sermon is especially for our new confirmands but I invite you all to listen in. Today celebrates an important step on your journey with God. You have completed your confirmation class. You have successfully passed your examination by the Session, thanks to some wonderful Sunday School teachers past and present, to the help of your parents and the guidance of your mentors. You have learned about our church history and more about what it means to be a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA). You have made statements about your faith.

Today you will make promises to God to be faithful, productive members of the body of Christ. This is not a promise to be perfect or to have no doubts or questions. It is not even a promise never to get lost. It is a promise to love God and to do everything in your power to follow where God's love leads you.

And to the rest of the congregation, I am going to ask you to make promises too. Because Jesus has placed these young disciples in OUR hands to continue to nourish and guide and comfort and help them in every way that we can. They are still our children. They have not graduated because, where the Christian walk is concerned, we NEVER graduate.

At times, they will let God down. And truth be told, we all do that at some time or another with our words or our actions or our inactions. But let's think again about the fishermen. I imagine that the disciples felt that they had let Jesus down and were remembering how often they had disappointed him. Jesus' coming to them on the beach was a reaffirmation that we never graduate from God's care. Because God seeks the ones who think they need him the least – the sinners, the deniers, the doubters! You and me!

In her book *The Heart of God*, Sister Joan Chittister tells the following story. “Who is closer to God,” the seeker asked, “the saint or the sinner?” “Why the sinner, of course,” the elder replied. “But how can that be?” the seeker asked. “Because,” the elder said, “every time a person sins they break the cord that binds them to God. But every time God forgives them, the cord is knotted again. And so, thanks to the mercy of God, the cord gets shorter and the sinner closer to Him!”

And I think this is why Jesus' appearance to his disciples is such an important story for us today. And for our new disciples. It reminds us all, no matter where we are in our walk with Christ, that by grace, God will continue to come to us where we are. God will continue to reveal himself to us in ways that we can believe. God will always use us, even when we don't know it to accomplish his purposes. God will always be in fellowship with us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, the truth of God's amazing love is this: no matter how weak or strong we are in our faith. No matter where we are in our journey with God or what obstacles we are facing. No matter how assuredly we feel the presence of the Spirit, God will be standing on the shore, beckoning us to come to the fellowship that He has prepared. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.