



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Follow Me
John 21:15-19

The text for today is John 21:15-19. This is the account of Jesus' fifth appearance. Remember his first appearance was to a group of women on the morning of Easter. Luke records Jesus appearing to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, then that evening Jesus appeared to a gathering of his disciples except for Thomas who was missing. One week later also on Sunday, Jesus appeared to the disciples again, only this time Thomas was present, and you may remember the story of doubting Thomas.

The time frame is not clear for today's text. We are only told that "afterward Jesus appeared again." What happened was that Peter told his friends that he was going fishing and six others went with him. Four are named and two are not. It is assumed that the two disciples who are not named are Andrew and Philip, and if this is true, then most of these disciples who went with Peter to fish were also fishermen.

Now, Peter was a practical man, not knowing what to do between these appearances of Jesus, not knowing when they would happen, or if they would continue to happen. And at this point the Holy Spirit had not come upon the church, and Peter knew he could not just sit around. Someone needed to provide food, so he went fishing.

These six disciples fished all night and caught nothing. It appears they had about as much skill as I have when it comes to fishing. Now as morning broke Jesus appeared on the shore, and being some 100 yards from the boat he shouted, "Have you caught any fish?" Well, you can hear the disgust in their answer, "No, we haven't caught anything except for a couple of old boots and a license plate." I can only imagine the words that John did not record.

Well, the disciples did not realize it was Jesus on the shore, but they had to experience some *déjà vu* when Jesus called out, “There are fish on the right side of the boat. Cast your nets there.” They had heard that before, and maybe in the back of their minds they were thinking, “Could it be him? He is so far away, it is hard to tell.” Well, they cast their nets one more time and so many fish were caught in the net they could barely haul it in. John said, “It’s the Lord!” And before the words left his mouth, there was the splash of Peter jumping off the boat into the water heading toward Jesus.

When the disciples pulled their boat ashore, it appeared that Jesus had done some fishing for he had some fish cooking over a fire and some bread ready for breakfast. This is a detail John could have inserted to make sure his readers knew that Jesus was not a ghost, but a resurrected flesh and blood body. For a ghost does not cook breakfast, nor does it eat with people, and Jesus did both.

There are two details here that are of interest. One is the precise number of fish recorded at 153, and the second is that the net did not break. You may remember early in Jesus’ ministry the disciples at Jesus’ command caught such a load of fish that the nets began to tear. This time the nets did not tear. Either they had to purchase new and better nets, for if they were continue to fish with Jesus around, they were going to need some strong nets; or just maybe the net did not break so the net could become a symbol of the church. For the church is known as a net which can include everyone and still hold more, for the grace of God found in the church is endless.

Now for the number of fish, understanding that John had a habit of using symbols in his gospel, there have been some fascinating theories about why there were 153 fish. William Barclay gives a history of the number 153. The first is given by Cyril of Alexandria. He believed that 100 stood for the fullness of the gentiles; 50 stood for the remnant of Israel; and 3 stood for the Trinity. Thus for Cyril 153 was a picture of the church filled with gentiles and Jews.

I love Augustine's theory. You see, 10 is the number of the commandments and 7 is the number of grace, for the gifts of the Spirit are sevenfold. If you add 10 and 7 you get 17, and if you begin with 1 then add 2, then add 3, then add 4 all the way to 17 the sum is 153. I did the math and Augustine was right, but I'm not sure what it proves, but it is interesting and good filler for sermon material.

The ancient historian Jerome stated there were 153 different species of fish in the sea and thus the catch of 153 fish symbolizes the fact that some day all the nations will be gathered together in Christ.

It could, it just could be, that there is no symbolism here and the disciples actually were 153 fish, which were counted in order for the fishermen to brag about the catch, for you know how fishermen love to brag! And a catch of 153 fish in one net is worthy of a good fishing story.

I am not sure what to do with these numbers, and it is impossible to understand symbols when we do not have the code, but I am confident there is something important about the net which did not tear and has become a symbol of the church. The net held all the fish, as the church is there ready to hold all who come to Christ. The church is big enough and God's grace is rich enough to even hold Peter, who in the story is the one who dragged the net ashore.

After that breakfast we have recorded in the Gospel According to John the following conversation. Please listen attentively to John 21:15-21:

**¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."
¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."
¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know**

that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

You may have heard some speak on these verses who point out that two different verbs for love are used in the passage. I really do not see this as anything more than using two words for love interchangeably. What is important is that Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, for you remember that Peter denied Jesus three times, and now Jesus gives him the opportunity to affirm his love three times.

You might note the first time Jesus asked, he said, “Simon do you love me more than these?” At this point Jesus may have been pointing to the boat, the nets, the fish and the other tools of his trade. “Simon, do you love me enough to leave all this and follow?” Jesus could have been referring to the disciples, saying “Simon, do you love me more than your brothers?” If this is the case then Simon, who once said, “Though all fall away I will not.” If this were the question it appears that Simon, also known as Peter, recognized his frailty, and thus he did not say, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you more than my bothers here.” He simply said, “Lord, you know I love you.”

Simon had learned from his denial that he could not compare his love for Jesus to that of others; he was simply glad that he loved Jesus. Maybe we can learn from Simon, for there is no need to try to be more spiritual than others, to try to tell the world how much more we love Jesus than others love Jesus. All we are to do is love him.

Jesus then told Peter how to love him, and that is to tend and to feed his sheep. That is how Jesus told Peter to love him, “Tend to and feed my sheep.”

Now I come to the final two words of the text. And that is if you love Jesus, Jesus says, “Follow me.” That’s good Presbyterian theology, for we do

not follow in order to gain Jesus' love and grace; we already have that, we follow in response to what Jesus has already accomplished for us. And now we are to follow Jesus – not out of guilt or fear, but out of love and gratitude.

Now to follow the resurrected Christ means that Easter is not a one day event. Jesus is to touch the world through us with the message of Easter. And the message of Easter is that which was once dead is now alive. Jesus was dead, but is now alive. We were dead in our sins, but through the wonder of the cross we are forgiven and made alive.

To be dead then to be alive, that is the Easter theme we see throughout the Bible. And that is how we tend and feed His sheep: to touch them with the message of Easter, to give them life, to share our Lord's love for all people.

Remember the story Jesus told about the man who had two sons. "The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So the father divided his property between his sons. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living." It's a story of death. It's a story of a son who would sever his relationship with his loving father.

Of course, you know the story of the prodigal son. When he came to his senses he went back to his father, and to the astonishment of the elder brother, the father ran to welcome the younger son home and prepared to throw a party. Remember what transpired at the end of the story? The elder brother was feeling a little miffed that he had always been faithful to his father, but his father never threw him a big party. The father said to his elder son, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

I love those words, "He was dead, but he is now alive. Dead, then alive-- he was dead and came to life." The dead coming to life – that's an Easter story!

It's like the story Sue read earlier about Elijah. The boy in the story was dead, but God gave the boy back his life. Dead, then alive--that is the basic outline of an Easter story.

I can tell you my story of how I came to Christ. I was dead in my sin, but Christ has given me life. This too is an Easter story. But allow me a few more minutes to tell you a couple of more Easter stories.

One Easter story comes from the Central African nation of Rwanda. It is a country a little larger than the state of Vermont. If you draw a line from Nacogdoches to Beaumont, over to Houston, then to College Station then back to Nacogdoches, you would have drawn an area about the size of Rwanda.

Civil war broke out in Rwanda in 1990, mainly between the Hutu people and the Tutsi. It made news in our nation when in 1994 extremist Hutu slaughtered over 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus. It was a genocide that took place in a period of 100 days. Men, women and children were killed in horrific ways, and along with the terror were mass rapes of women before they were macheted.

You may remember the movie *Hotel Rwanda* that came out in 2005 that told the true story of a hotel manager who risked his own life and the life of his family to harbored refugees for as long as he could under the protection of the United Nations, but in the end he had to organize an escape and saved over 1,000 lives. One source refers to the movie as "Rwanda's Schindler's List."

It has been 24 years since the horrors of the genocide, and the church has been an active presence working toward healing and reconciliation. I saw an interview this past week of Pastor Jerome Bizimana, who serves in the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda. The members of his church have started what they call "The Light Groups." They bring together genocide survivors, all who had family members killed and those who took part in the slaughter of so many innocent people. Their goal is to bring harmony and peace.

At the church men who were part of Hutu who heartlessly killed so many tell their stories and with tears ask for forgiveness. And those who survived the horrors with weeping tell their stories and offer forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. It is not easy, and it involves a long process of working and worshipping together, but it is a tribute that in a Good Friday world Easter has more power as these people work toward reconciliation.

The movement has grown and an emphasis has developed on reaching the youth of the nation. Members of Pastor's Bizimama's church now travel from parish to parish sharing their stories and sharing Christ's message of reconciliation.

Kay Day, a missionary sent out by our church, teaches at the Protestant University in Rwanda. She will tell that it has been 24 years since the days of genocide, but today Rwanda is the most secure nation in all of Central Africa. There have been no armed conflicts in over 16 years.

Kay teaches Preaching and Biblical Interpretation to her students with an emphasis on reconciliation. Her theme is to lead by example, and of course our example is Jesus Christ, and especially the example of his love and Jesus being a servant leader. Remember our Lord as the servant who took a wash bowl and a towel and washed his disciples' feet, and he reminds all of us that the greatest in the kingdom is the servant of all. And of course there is the example of Jesus' prayer on the cross, "Father, forgive them."

It is nothing short of miraculous to watch a video of Rwanda Presbyterians, who 24 years ago before they met Jesus Christ were killing and being killed, but now standing in worship together singing, "This is my story, this is my song, praising my savior all the day long. This is my story; this is my song, praising my savior all the day long."

Yes, we live in a Good Friday world, but what is more powerful than death is the power of Easter to bring life where there was death.

Rwanda still has many problems to overcome, and one is a very high unemployment rate. For every job there may be as many as 5,000 applications. Did you know that Presbyterian Women from our PCUSA have sent a grant to the church in Rwanda to open a school where youth are taught job skills? But more importantly, they are being taught how to start new businesses.

Where there was death, where Good Friday ruled, Easter has risen upon the people of Rwanda, and we should all pray for our brothers and sisters in that nation that through the power of the Holy Spirit they will continue to move that nation toward reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ.

This Easter story reminds me of the words of James who wrote in the book that bears his name, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep ones self unstained by the world."

To many people Easter is only a story, and it will continue to be only an ancient story, that is until the message of Easter touches us in such a way that we are willing to stop making our security our highest priority and we throw off our shell and touch someone else with the hope we find in Easter.

The hymn we sang before the sermon has the distinction of being referred to as the African American National Anthem. We sing it at the annual Martin Luther King service at Mt. Zion Baptist church. It was written in 1921 by James Weldon Johnson.

Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida, and his mother imparted in him a love for English Literature and Music. Johnson was trained in the law and was the first African American to be admitted to the Florida Bar. At one point in his career he was hired as the principal of the largest public school in Jacksonville, but was making less than half the salary of his white colleagues in other schools.

He became a diplomat and was appointed by Theodore Roosevelt as U.S. Consul at Puerto Cavello, Venezuela and later served in Nicaragua.

Johnson is remembered for his work in the area of civil rights. And you think it was bad for Martin Luther King in the 50's and 60's, imagine doing this work in the 1920's. Yet he organized peace demonstrations which protested race riots in the north and lynching in the south.

I appreciate the words of the hymn we sang, for they tell us that Easter is dawning. "Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us; Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us; Facing the rising sun of our new day begun, Let us march on, till victory is won." Can you imagine that those words were written in 1921?

What did Jesus say to Peter? "Feed my lambs," and, "follow me." In response to the love of God in giving us life I pray that we will all get involved in passing on that life to others, whether it is working with Love In the Name of Christ, Health Horizons, Community Rx, Project Hope, mentoring at Raguet, through another mission project of this church, or simply striking out on your own and using your talents, your money, your education, and your vocation to share the Easter message throughout the year, so that our Easter celebration next year will be more than a one hour affair, but will be a celebration that will continue to give hope and life in a world filled with despair and death.

I wonder what you can do this week, what plans can you make in the coming months, what strategies are you making to allow God to use you to bring Easter to others. How about visiting a neighbor who is lonely or confused? How about sharing the gospel with a co-worker who does not know Christ? How about giving of your financial resources to a mission project? How about donating your talents to a group that is working to alleviate suffering somewhere in our city or world? How about helping someone to learn English?

There are so many ways that God is calling the members of this church to be involved in making the message of Easter a reality in our experience and in the experience of others.

We had a glorious Easter Day service three weeks ago. Of course, I understand that our choir has to take most of the credit. And let me tell you the choir and our organist spent many hours working on the music for that service and other services. But to tell you the truth, our Easter was in fact a complete failure; that is, unless we respond and commit ourselves to its message. For Christ is risen, he has risen indeed. Let us, with God's help make that a reality in the lives of others. "Feed our Lord's sheep, and follow him." Amen.