

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Easter 3  
May 5, 2019

## **Back in the Same Old Boat**

John 21:1-19

The Gospel Lesson assigned for this Sunday is a “fish story.” Seven disciples led by Simon Peter, “The Big Fisherman,” go out one night on the Sea of Galilee to fish. All night long they dip their nets into the lake and catch nothing. Here in Illinois, with the arrival of Spring, fishing has started again in earnest. Every fisherman knows how discouraging it can be when the fishing is great – but the catching is lousy.

What a let-down it can be to get up early at “dark o clock,” collect all your gear, load it into the car, drive to the lake, unload all the gear, walk through the bushes, get scratched in the face by the brush, bait your hook, dunk the worm, fall into the lake or river a couple of times, and have the only bites you get all day be from deer flies. After a few experiences like that, is it any wonder fishermen lie?

The disciples didn’t fish quite like that. But their night’s work must have been equally frustrating. They probably cast their heavy net over the side of the boat several dozen times. Then they hauled it back up again by hand. It was back-breaking, muscle aching, finger burning labor. The net came up, dripping wet. But always empty.

So, there they were, shortly after Easter, the greatest event since the dawn of time, when the Son of God came back from the dead with mighty power, victorious over sin and death; there the disciples were, just after Easter, “back in the same old boat,” fishing, but catching nothing.

It was the first post-Easter letdown. But, not the last! Sometimes, after the joy of Easter, don't we find ourselves “back in the same old boat?” Do we, for example, find ourselves “back in the same old boat,” church-wise? What a joyous, uplifting Easter we had here at Good shepherd! The church was full! And there were more than 2 kids in the pews! their eyes glazed over from chocolate and jelly bean highs.

There was a “mountain” of spring-time flowers rising-up off the floor, climbing up the altar, reaching skyward. The sanctuary was filled with sweet smells. There was magnificent music, everyone singing at their best.

But, the next week, half of those Easter worshippers were missing. Things are a bit better today. But how will the church look next Sunday? That's a cause of concern always for me...

The church sometimes finds itself “back in the same old boat” after Easter. Perhaps some of us feel a bit post-Easter letdown ourselves. I can well imagine how Peter might have felt, during that long night of fruitless fishing.

I imagine he started off fussing and fuming. Fishing is fun when you catch fish. It can be frustrating when you don't: especially for a "Type A" personality like Peter.

I imagine that, as the night turned dark, Peter's thoughts turned darker. Maybe he thought to himself, "How could I have possibly denied Jesus 3 times?! Especially after I had sworn to him I never would! Jesus called me 'The Rock.' 'Some Rock!' I turned into sand! Not only am I not a 'fisher of men.' Now I can't even catch fish!"

Like Peter, our Easter faith, so bright and believing on Easter morning, can sometimes grow dim within weeks. Doubt and self-doubt and drudgery return. We find ourselves with the same seemingly insoluble problems, and no solutions in sight. We long to soar high with Jesus. But sometimes we find ourselves like chickens, scratching out a life in the barnyard dust.

Of course, that's where Satan, the enemy, would have us be. Maybe you've heard the legend about the Devil's tool box. You think Sears has everything in "Tool Country!" Satan has even more tools. There's hatred, envy, bitterness, anger, self-righteousness, jealousy, deceit, laziness, malice and lust – and many more.

But Satan's favorite tool is simple discouragement. The Devil knows if he could just get us in a defeatist, discouraged mood, as Peter was that night; if he could just get us to lose hope and perspective, he can do almost anything else he wants to with us later. Because we start to wonder, "What's the use?" or "Why bother to have high standards?" That "post-Easter let-down" can be serious business! Satan, defeated at the cross and the empty-tomb, will try to sneak back into all our lives. Discouragement is one of the principle tools he will use.

Fortunately, there's a happy ending to this story. It starts with the stranger on the shore. Peter and his friends fish all night and catch nothing. But then a stranger calls out a question every fisherman must have heard at one time or another: "How are they biting? Catching anything today?"

What I get from this part of the story is that the Risen Christ doesn't just meet us on the mountaintops, like joyous Easter Sundays. Jesus also comes to us down at sea-level, in our day-to-day experience. Jesus is even with us in times of loss and failure, like Peter was experiencing. We just have to be alert and keep our eyes open for Jesus.

Cary Grant, the movie star, used to tell about how he was once walking along a street and met a man whose eyes locked on him with excitement. "Wait a minute," said the man, "I know who you are! You're...you're...no, don't tell me, you're, you're Rock Hudson! No, you're not Rock Hudson, you're..."

“I’m Cary Grant,” “I’m Cary Grant!

“No, no, said the man, “You’re not Cary Grant! You’re...you’re...don’t tell me, I want to guess...”

Sometimes we don’t see Jesus near us because we’re looking for or expecting someone different! But Jesus could be in the stranger who asks us a good question. Or in the co-worker or neighbor who asks, out of concern, “How are you doing?” Or our fellow church-member, who concerned for us, calls to make sure we come back to worship.

Jesus can be at work in the loved one or friend who encourages you to take a new perspective: “Look, you’ve been doing things this way for a while now. Why not try something different: a new approach, a new attitude, a new counselor? Try putting your net down on the other side!”

Jesus could be in the still small voice that we hear when we’re quiet. Jesus is reaching out to each of us every day in a variety of ways, sometimes even in the most mundane moments. But are we watching for Jesus? If we want to get out of the “same old boat,” we might start looking for the Stranger on the shore.

Jesus is always reaching out to us. We’re the ones who need to head toward him. That’s what Peter did. First, he put on his clothes (he had been stripped to the waist for work). Then Peter “took the plunge.”

He jumped in with both feet and began to swim for shore! I can imagine him flailing and splashing in his water-soaked clothes, all the while shouting, “Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!” He loved Jesus so much, he couldn’t wait to be near him.

And when Peter did come near to Jesus, he found out that things really were different. Remember how Peter denied Jesus three times? Remember how he had been blaming himself and kicking himself all night for his failure? But then there’s that wonderful scene, after the fried-fish breakfast. Jesus ask Peter three times if he loves him. Three times Peter affirms his love for Christ. Three denials. Three affirmations. They balance. Peter’s denials are canceled out. The Risen Christ, who conquered sin and death, was also sensitive to Peter’s feelings, and found a way to help his friend out of a slump he’d been in. Sure, all of us sometimes get discouraged. Sure, we don’t always shine with the brightness of Easter faith. But as an old folk-hymn puts it, “Every Sunday is Easter Sunday.” The Risen Christ never leaves us. Jesus is always patiently waiting on the shore, waiting to point us to a better way, waiting to help us out. Waiting to use us in some way to feed his sheep.

The miracle of Easter is not that it happened once, but that the Risen Christ is still with us daily. No matter how bad we may sometimes feel, we’re never, ever back in the same old boat...if we can just keep recognizing and heading toward the Stranger on the shore. He’s always there. Are we watching for him? For as the folk-hymn puts it, “Every Sunday is Easter Sunday.” And that, of course, includes TODAY!! Amen!!