

Throw Your Nets into the Water Again! **John 21:1-19**

Easter

As you all know, Easter and Christmas are the two busiest seasons for pastors and churches. During Holy week, we had a beautiful Maundy Thursday joint worship service with our sister church, Zion KUMC. Having dinner together and sharing communion was meaningful. On Good Friday, we meditated on the meaning of the cross from Mary's perspective. It was a moving and beautiful service. On Easter, we had a joyful celebration of our risen Christ. We were a bit busier than usual and had a meaningful Lenten season and Easter. After Easter worship, I was relieved of the busyness of Holy week and the Easter service, but at the same time, I struggled with one question. "So what now?" Christ has risen. Great! He is risen indeed! Fantastic! So what? The Ukraine War goes on and is getting worse. Thousands of bodies are discovered every day. The death toll from mass shootings continues to rise and people are dying of Covid-19. While our Christ certainly overcame the power of death, the gospel of the risen Christ doesn't seem to bring any change to our world. We expected God's salvation and redemption, but have you experienced any dramatic changes in your personal lives? Not really. What do you feel when the reality we live seems contradictory to the gospel of the risen Christ? Disappointment, powerlessness, doubts, apathy?

I am going fishing!

The disciples might have felt the same way we do today after Easter. Peter and the other disciples believed that Jesus was the Messiah who would bring political liberation of Israel, so they left everything behind and followed him. These naïve fishermen enjoyed the thrill of being a part of the coming revolution. However, the victory they expected would not come to pass in their lifetime. Their beloved teacher was captured, tortured and murdered. They fled for their lives and hid themselves behind locked doors. However, the risen Christ appeared before them and gave them a great mission. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus also promised the power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples certainly met the risen Christ and they might have had a late Easter celebration that evening.

Does this encounter with the risen Christ change the situation? Not really. People in Jerusalem were still hostile to the followers of Jesus and there were rumors that the Roman soldiers would soon look for them too. Although Peter and the other disciples saw the risen Christ and received the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit, they had not seen the fulfillment of the promise yet. As we know, waiting is always hard. Peter and his friends were living in an 'in-between time'—the time when we wait on God's next move. Waiting is hard, so people often quit waiting and returned to their old lives.

Peter and other disciples turned back to the life they once knew, the life of fishermen. Peter and his friends withdrew themselves from Jerusalem and went back to the Sea of Tiberias, where they used to fish for their living. Peter told his friends, "I'm going fishing." He planned a late-night fishing trip, and seven of the eleven showed up. Peter and the others wanted to return to their old way of life and ignore the fact that they had met the risen Christ and that Jesus Christ had given them a great commission. They met the risen Christ, but even that first-hand experience of the resurrection didn't change them at once.

Turning Back to the Old Life

We are not very different from Jesus' disciples. I have read several books about church revitalization and church growth. Interestingly, different authors point out the same problem many declining churches are facing. The common problem is that "people want their church to grow, but they just don't want it to change." In his book, Philip Schroeder, the director of Congregational Development for the North Georgia Annual Conference, describes three types of small churches. First, the Not Yet Big church; Second, the Stable, small church; and third, the getting smaller church. [ppt] As you can see on the screen, the 'getting smaller church' tends to focus on the past. Looking back at what we have done, what we did, and what God called us to do, while the Not-yet-big church focuses on the future such as what God is calling us to do or what we might do for our community. Where do we belong? I believe that we belong 'in-between stable small church and not-yet-big church.' I hope that we can create a culture of the not-yet-big church! For this task, we need to remember that our way is not turning back to our old life. The way of life is moving forward.

Actually, I had a plan to start strategic planning meetings a few years ago. Unfortunately, the pandemic hit society so we had to change all our plans. Personally, I needed to complete my dissertation so I could not initiate this process. Now, I have completed my dissertation and in the near future, will start to bother you to share your ideas and do something more for the church! "Beware of your paster!" Not today though!" Of course, this way of transformation will not always be easy and we will have to fight our own desire to go back to our old and familiar ways of church life, but we need to move forward for the future.

The Easter experience is not a one-time event but an ongoing event of Christ

Failing to move forward, Peter and the other disciples couldn't wait for God's next move and turned to their old lives, the lives of fishermen. However, these experienced fishermen failed to catch anything all night long. Failure in fishing, physical exhaustion, and disappointment reminded them of their failure on the night of Holy Friday; shame in their abandonment of their teacher; and their confusion over encountering the risen Christ. Although nobody was talking, they realized that they couldn't go back. They knew that they couldn't simply go back to their old lives, but they didn't know the way forward. So, they just tried to do what they could do. The good news is that Jesus came down to where they were.

Jesus called to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." Jesus said, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." And as they did, "there were so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net." Isn't this scene familiar to you? This is what happened when Jesus first called Peter in the Gospel of Luke!

Jesus didn't abandon his disciples, but came back to their life place once again to remind them of their greater mission, the mission to catch people, not fish. Jesus did not blame the disciples' ignorance or impatience. Jesus set a fire so his disciples could get warm after fighting the cold wind all night long. [ppt] He prepared fish and some bread to feed them. (Don't these fish look delicious?) "Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them" as a reminder of his convent at the Last Supper. For Peter who denied Jesus three times, Jesus gave a great commission by saying, "take care of my sheep" three times. Jesus came down to his disheartened disciples and empowered them to dream a great dream again.

As I reflected on this story, I came to realize that the Easter experience is not a one-time event, but an ongoing event of Christ. It also means that we can encounter the risen Lord again and again throughout our life journey. Remember the angels' words on Easter morning. "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24: 6) If we believe

in the risen Christ, we have to look for him among the living. If you want to see the risen Christ, look around you. You will see the risen Christ in your sisters and brothers! You may see the risen Christ's hand of healing through the gentle hands of friends serving and loving you. Other people may see the risen Christ in you!

Throw Your Nets into the Water Again!

What do we need to do? We need to throw our nets into the water again. We may be afraid of failing, but that's o.k. With faith, throw our nets into the water to catch and save souls! To be fishers of people, the first thing we need to do is go to the life places of people. Just as Christ came down to the life place of the disciples, we need to go out to meet people. Phil Schroeder once visited a church in South Georgia. During the children's sermon, the children's minister stood at the front of the church and started her talk. She had a long fishing pole with a worm dangling from her hook. The children asked what she was doing, and the children's minister said she was fishing. She said, "this is how United Methodists fish. We sit in the sanctuary and sometimes even try different kinds of bait, hoping that the fish will come to us." Do you know how the children responded? The children yelled, "You can't fish here. You have to go where the fish are!" And the children's minister dropped the mic. (Small Church Checkup, 133)

Even children know how to fish. Right? You can't just sit and wait for people to come. [ppt] Following the lead of our Christ, let us go where people are and throw our nets into the water again for catch! Don't be afraid. The risen Christ is with us and will lead us to the best fishing spots in which many people are waiting for the gospel of redemption. Follow his lead and with faith... throw your nets! Then, our Christ will finish his work! Amen.