

**Sermon: A Tidy Ending**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

1 May 2022

Based on **Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19**

Do you ever get the feeling that you might have bitten off more than you can chew? That's how it's been for me all week with these readings.

We began reading Revelation last week and we'll continue to work through it for the next few weeks. But the Gospel reading offers so much for us to dwell on.

The apocalypse we call Revelation, placed at the very end of the Christian Bible, maybe so we wouldn't notice it was there, has everything: hymns, prayers, code names, visions, and a lot of scary stuff. It is a letter for a few hidden, subversive churches written in a time when it was hard to be a Christian. It describes a period of conflict and suffering as the people wait for God to intervene to punish evil and reward good at the beginning of a future new age.

Now, any revelation enables us to perceive what is really there to see. *This* revelation is a proclamation about who is in charge. The events following the Resurrection also enabled the disciples to see how things really are, which is one connection Revelation has with the Gospel. John established that believing without seeing is our primary challenge.

Today's reading began with Jesus coming to the disciples, this time by the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee, which is really a freshwater lake, which is beside the point.

But last week, we talked about how this epilogue was added at a later date. Apparently, as in Mark's Gospel, the original ending was a little too abrupt and unsatisfying. Thomas' trust issues were no way to end Jesus' story. It was untidy. Loose ends remained. Today's reading fixes that. It completes some lines of thought left unfinished or unsaid earlier, and it satisfies those who didn't like the original ending.

There are two parts to this story, and they both offer us difficulties and insights.

In the first part of the story, the fishing scene, the risen Jesus comes to the disciples on the beach. He came to them. Great imagery but it raises some problems.

In his first words since denying Jesus back in chapter 18, Peter says he's going fishing, and the other disciples say, yeah, let's all go. Having seen the risen Christ in Jerusalem, why would they return to Galilee to resume their (not so successful) former occupation? Granted, seeing Jesus die on the Cross could be a demotivator for anybody, but they have all also seen the risen Christ.

So why does it seem as if they are reverting to an old way of life? Is their faith that shaky, or could the message be that Jesus will appear even to failed disciples?

Then, in the second part of the story, Jesus speaks directly to Peter in a conversation that has generated a lot of scholarly debate.

Peter seems to be at a loose end in terms of his faith journey. He denied Jesus three times and will spend the rest of his life trying to live it down. He was supposed to lead the others to life in a new community, caring for the widows and orphans and so on, part of but separate from the ways of the world, and yet here we find him fishing.

We wonder if he ever bothered to look for Jesus after the crucifixion. We know he came to the empty tomb but then he went home. Mary Magdalene, on the other hand, wept when she could not find Jesus. But because she loved him, she looked for him and she found him, even though at first, she thought he was a gardener (John 20:11-18). There is a connection between *loving* and *seeking*, and seeking is a mark of discipleship.

So, Jesus wants to know what's up with Peter. He wants to know if he's in or out. Straight away, he asked him, "Do you love me?"

This is a very carefully scripted piece of writing. There's a question/answer pattern here. The English translation hides it, so we can't tell that the first two times Jesus asks Peter, he uses the word *agape*, which refers to a higher, spiritual love; it refers to a deep, reverential love. This is not the same as saying, do you love pizza.

Peter responded with a different word – *philein* – that suggests he likes Jesus a lot, like a pal; he has affection for Jesus. Both words mean *love* but there's a semantic difference between the two.

And when Jesus tells Peter to “feed my lambs” and “tend my sheep,” Peter gives no response. The problem and the point in this exchange is that Jesus is looking for a commitment and Peter can’t give it to him.

That’s something for us to consider. If Jesus approached us in the grocery store, or on the golf course, or in a bread line, and engaged us in the same conversation, how would we respond? Put on the spot like that, it’s no surprise that we freeze up. Peter might have had a lot to say about it the next day, after a night of thinking it over, but if he did, it’s not recorded here.

Jesus is up front about what he’s asking. He calls us to care for the most vulnerable in our communities. And by the way, it might be dangerous. But, if we follow him, we’ll encounter God every day. No time to think about it though; the time to commit to Jesus is now.

Notice that *this* is the disciples’ last meal with Jesus. We celebrate and remember that last supper in the upper room, but this breakfast on the beach counts too. It is here that Jesus shows extraordinary grace and forgiveness in his willingness to entrust his ministry to Peter, a flawed man who often seems to be headed in the wrong direction.

Some people think of the first half of the story as a metaphor for the Christian experience. For example, we can say the catch signifies the apostolic mission to be ‘fishers of people’ (Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17). Only John mentions a specific number of fish – 153, no more and no less – and he stresses the fact that the net of the metaphorical Christian community was not torn, despite carrying the weight of all the different kinds of fish it caught. And Peter is the one who hauls it in. So, there’s always hope.

Scripture is loaded with nuggets like this, just waiting for us to find them.

The other day, for some reason, I thought back to my days as a software geek, realizing now that I could have worked from home back then, if only I had something more than a 300-baud modem connection. And then I started thinking about how lucky I have been throughout my career, all the way from my first software job right up to my call to New North. And then I realized that luck had nothing to do with it. The truth is that God has been active in my life from the get-go. That’s the benefit of hindsight: we can look back and say, oh, well, now that makes sense.

But if you don't want to wait that long, a quicker way to understanding how God is at work in our lives might be to read Scripture and take it on faith that what it is guiding us to is real. These aren't just stories about Jesus; they are a literal testament to actual events. We can't know the details and we can pick apart the ancient texts forever to uncover nuance, but overall, we can trust that this is what happened.

Today's Gospel reading is a mash-up of a story – first, Jesus had no fish, then he had fish cooking over a fire, and then there was bread too. But he met the disciples when they didn't expect to see him, and they encountered him again and again. He met two of them on the road to Emmaus. He came to all of them in a locked room. And now, here he is on the beach, cooking breakfast.

He'll come to us too, not just in the sanctuary but also in our homes, in our jobs, and in our lives. He'll come to us even if we tell ourselves we're not looking for him.

Maybe that's why Mark and John's Gospels include multiple epilogues – because the story really has no ending. We just keep adding to it every time we gather.

Amen.