



Resurgence: Peter

John 21:1-19

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In this Easter season, we are looking at the Biblical stories that tell us of encounters the early believers had with the resurrected Jesus. In each story, we find that when we encounter the risen One, we have a resurgence of life and faith. We have seen Mary Magdalene go from weeping in sorrow at the empty tomb to proclaiming Jesus' resurrection to the disciples ... and we have seen Thomas, who went from skeptical realism, doubting life after death was possible, to exclaiming the truth of the resurrection in his proclamation, "My Lord and my God!" Each time the resurrected Lord is encountered, his presence made known brings new life to the believers. Today's text, as we are told in verse 14, is the third time Jesus appears to the disciples after he was risen from the dead.

The 21st chapter of John is an interesting chapter. It's so interesting, in fact, that many scholars doubt its original authorship. Despite its presence in even the earliest manuscripts of John's gospel, the Greek writing, the difference in vocabulary, and the change in narrative focus from the rest of John have led many to believe the 21st chapter was added after John's death. Indeed, there are a number of Greek verbs used in the last chapter of the Gospel that did not once appear in the first 20 chapters. In some ways, this final chapter seems to have been added as a way to reinforce John's place as "the disciple Jesus loved."

It's also interesting that in the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – which share a great deal across their story lines regarding Jesus' life and ministry prior to death, they include very little of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined, there are really just 3 stories of Jesus' resurrection: Mary's encounter at the tomb, the Emmaus Road interaction, and the final great commission. In John's gospel, there are 4 resurrection encounters, three of which aren't found in the synoptics. Our encounter today on the sea-side is one of these seemingly out of the ordinary stories.

What makes today's story seem even more odd, is that it comes across as a mash-up of some earlier stories from Luke's gospel. Consider in Luke 5, Jesus is standing on the side of the Sea of Galilee; he saw the fishermen out in the water casting their nets with no success. Simon Peter was on board the boat, as one of the fishermen. Jesus instructs them to cast their nets further out. Following his instruction, they land a catch of fish so massive, they can't bring it on board without the help of other boats.

Then, still in the area of the Sea of Galilee, if we look to Luke, chapter 9, we find the crowds following Jesus were growing hungry. Jesus invited the disciples to feed them, but they had very little food available. What food they did have was a couple loaves of bread and two fish.

With just this small amount of food available, Jesus saw that all 5,000 men, and the women and children, were fed until full.

Interesting that this story in John 21 begins with Simon Peter saying to a handful of other disciples, "I am going fishing." It peaks with Jesus telling them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and them catching a load of fish so heavy they couldn't pull it onto the boat. And it concludes with Jesus sharing a meal with the disciples that consisted of ... yep, you guessed it, bread and fish.

It's hard to say with total certainty how this text made it into John's gospel account, and whether or not it was authored by John. But perhaps what strikes me as most significant is not how this story connects with previous stories of Jesus' ministry; what surprises me is how this story on the side of the Sea of Galilee concludes the 4th Gospel's account.

In Mark and Luke, the gospel accounts end with Jesus' ascension. They end with this great climactic scene where Jesus vanishes from the presence of the disciples as he was taken up into heaven. Matthew's account doesn't narrate the ascension, but it ends with the disciples and Jesus on a mountain top where Jesus offers the disciples the Great Commission. His final words to them, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age," seem to be parting words. Though we don't read that Jesus ascended into heaven in Matthew, Jesus' words make it easy to imagine his departure.

These three Gospels conclude with the miraculous nature of Jesus offering the final glimpse of the resurrected Lord.

Encountering the miraculous nature of God in Christ is something people of faith have long desired. We strive for a glimpse of the power and inexplicable ability of Jesus to manifest himself. We want to see a person healed of terminal cancer; we want to see a winning lottery ticket (of course, promising to give more than 10% back to the church); we want some sign that validates our beliefs. Sometimes we beg for such miracles in less serious ways – like those who prayed for the Caps to win the Stanley Cup for a second consecutive year, offering, "Lord, if you would let them win again, I'll have complete faith in your power." ... So much for that miracle.

In 2013, author Joe Nickell published a book titled, *The Science of Miracles*. In it, he examines over 50 miracles that have been reported in Christian history, questioning whether they are true miracles or just coincidences of science. For example, he looks at the story of Juan Diego, a 16th Century Aztec from Mexico, who reportedly met in person the mother Mary. Later, an image of the woman was miraculously and unexplainably imprinted on his cloak as a confirmation of their encounter. Nickell also writes about the 2004 story from Hollywood, Florida, of a woman who had prepared herself a grilled-cheese sandwich without using any oil or butter. When taking her first bite, saw the image of Mary, the mother of Jesus, toasted on the bread. She later sold that Grilled-Cheese Madonna on eBay for \$28,000. The examples are endless of such odd, and unexplainable encounters with what seem to be miraculous appearances of Jesus, or Mary, or God, or another sign of the holy.

And perhaps it is the Biblical text that precipitates a desire for the miraculous. From creation to revelation, miracles are plentiful in the biblical text. Moses was called to lead Israel out of Egypt from the voice of God that came from a burning bush that was not consumed by the fire. Moses later led the people Israel from the land of Egypt by parting the waters of the sea, by calling upon God to have bread fall down from the sky, and by having water spring forth in the barren wilderness simply by striking his staff on a stone. There are many miracles in the Old and New Testament – from the blind receiving sight, to the walls of Jericho tumbling down, to the dead coming back to life.

We are conditioned to look for God in the miraculous. We are trained to give thanks to God for the healing of the incurable diseases; we are raised to see God in the presence of the unexpected job offer, or the lucky break; we are read the Biblical text and promised, “if you just ask God for it, it shall be yours” ... “knock and the door shall be opened” ... as if God is willing to sway a Super Bowl victory or Grammy decision – because, as we’re told, God can, and will do all things.

I don’t mean to bemoan the miraculous – Jesus was a miracle worker. Among the many miracles through which Jesus revealed God’s will, Jesus delivered God’s greatest and most inexplicable miracle, offering that we might have new life, even as people of sin, by conquering even death with his resurrection.

But for all the times we see God’s love in the miraculous, for the ways in which the synoptic gospels close out their story with the miracle of the ascension, and the way in which John has told his gospel thus far, even beginning with the mysterious and miraculous line, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” ... for all of the unexplainable, it is just the opposite that makes this text in John 21 so powerful.

Jesus calls to the disciples from the shore, setting up this rememberable moment, mimicking the story from Luke 5, inviting the disciples to cast out a bit further – to throw their net on the other side of the boat. The net becomes so full, that John, the beloved disciple, has his mind’s eye opened, and he exclaims, “It is the Lord.” That is the only thing in this chapter that is even somewhat miraculous. And even that miracle is quickly ruined by Peter.

As soon as John makes this remark, verse 7 says, “When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and he jumped into the lake.”

I have a lot of questions about this. So many questions. ... I’m genuinely curious – was Peter not of sound mind? Was the night of fishing so unproductive that he switched from fishing to drinking? ... Or, perhaps, was naked fishing a thing? Was that a normal custom for fishing in the first century? ... I’d suggest he was sunbathing, and trying to get rid of his farmer’s tan, but they had been out all night. This was early in the morning. The sun had barely come up. ... And he was there with six other disciples. Did the others not care? Were they also naked? Cause let tell you what, if we’re out fishing and you start stripping, that fishing trip is over. ... I mean, really, what’s going on here?

Sadly, or perhaps gratefully, the text doesn't expand on this detail. What it does tell us is that, like Forrest Gump upon seeing Lt. Dan sitting the dock, instead of guiding the boat over to the shore, Peter jumped off the boat and swam to the shoreline. He thought he could swim the 100 yards quicker than the disciples could dock up and get ashore.

When Peter gets ashore, what we find is that Jesus has a charcoal fire cooking some fish, and he has bread. This is not an extraordinary meal. In fact, Jesus didn't even bring enough fish for them all to eat, and it doesn't seem he's in the mood to multiply the loaves and the fishes. When they come ashore, Jesus says to the disciples, "bring some of the fish that you just caught." He's going to cook what they caught instead of supplying an abundance with what he already has cooking.

The disciples drag the net ashore, and we're told that in the net were 153 fish. Again, this may be a large number, or it may be a fisherman's tale, but this is no miraculous haul. It's not like we're told there were "too many fish to count," or "a great deal number of fish." Nope; there were 153. How tame.

And Jesus invites them, "Come and have breakfast."

This is nothing super-special; no healings; no grand teachings; no resurrections; no pharisaic corrections; this is Jesus inviting the disciples to have breakfast at a campfire by the sea. "Jesus behaves as if this is just another day at the office, while the disciples are left speechless in their stupor and uncertainty. For many of us, this is the way God shows up – not in lighting-filled explosions of clarity and wonder, but in awkward moments of inexplicable holiness."ⁱ

We may find God in the miraculous – we may witness moments of unexplainable mystery and mercy – but we have to stop expecting that we will *only* find God in the unbelievable. The disciples encountered Christ in the charcoal smoked fish. The two who walked to Emmaus with Jesus did not know him until they sat at the table and he broke the bread. Friends, please don't underestimate the power of *table fellowship*. Don't underestimate the power of gathering with one another around tables and sharing a well cooked meal, or a beverage of choice, or a loaf of bread and cup of juice.

"We live in an age where everything that has value must have some clearly defined purpose, where we are lost without roles or responsibilities."ⁱⁱ But for God's revelation of Christ – the resurrected and risen Lord – we find that Jesus shows up in the mundane; Jesus appears without warning in the unexpected gathering of believers around the most common of tables. This is communal revelation at its finest – where we encounter the holy simply by gathering with one another and being open to the presence of the almighty in our midst.

Sometimes, the best thing we can do to engage with the resurrected Lord is to share with one another in community, in fellowship, in service, or in simple conversation. It's my hope for each of you that can find that un-miraculous presence of God through gathering with one another. That's one of the things I love most about this community – you are some of the most welcoming and hospitable folks I know. You are an inviting and nurturing community. But our

gatherings are not meant to be limited to this time and space. This past week, Dana Wood, the chair of our Leadership Board, sent an email that talked about the importance of small groups – of get-togethers – of shared community. I want to echo her sentiments. See, I don't believe we were created to live this life alone. We were created to share in community – in fellowship – in collaborative and covenanted relationship.

If you haven't found that – if you're looking for that – if you desire to engage and share in this kind of table fellowship, I want to help get you connected. If you're looking for folks to walk through life with, that you might together discern the presence of the resurrected Lord in our midst with, I want to help you find such a gathering. If you're looking for a group you can sit around a charcoal fire and smoke some fish with, I want to help you find such a group.

See, I think more of us are like Peter than we'd like to claim. We do everything we can to keep ourselves busy – hoping that somehow, by doing the things we know how to do best, we can find God – we can find Christ – out on the boat in the water with our nets cast wide. But really, we're overextended ... we're worn out ... we're crazy, exhausted, and perhaps stripped down to our bare skin with no hope left. In the midst of our worst, we find a resurgence of life when we're called to slow down and to gather with the resurrected Christ in the most mundane of gatherings – by just sitting and sharing around the fire, or the table, or the picnic bench, or the coffee cup.

Slow down friends, for in our midst we have a table that invites us to encounter the resurrected one – the risen Lord – the savior who gives us new life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ S. Brian Erickson. *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.