

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter (Year C)

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*John 21:1-19*

*After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.*

*When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

*When 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.' A 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.' He 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. Very 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.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'*

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I've been thinking about fishing a lot lately. So much, in fact, that I've literally been dreaming about it. I believe that's my body's way of telling me it is wishing Mother Nature would hurry up and get her derriere to a summer state of mind. Mostly, that is because I discovered a love for fishing last summer. When I wasn't working on a sermon, or teaching our summer bible study, or smoking some baby back ribs, or lounging by the pool, chances are you could find me fishing for porgies at Shell Beach. The other beach I fished at was Reel Point, but I had a bad experience there once. One that I would like to share with you.

It was a gray, overcast afternoon at the turn of the tide; perfect for fishing. As many of you know, Reel Point creates a pinch point between Coecles Harbor and Gardiner's Bay. Therefore, when the tide comes in and goes out, all of the water is forced through a narrow passageway and, with it, the fish it carries. If you catch it at the right time, it looks like a river flowing because of the strong current.

I had selected my usual spot on the beach (one with which I had had much success prior). Methodically, I reached into the Pyrex bowl that contained the pieces of the clam that I had so carefully cut for bait. One by one, I put a piece of clam on the hook at the end of the three "porgy rigs" attached to my line. I was careful to make sure that each piece of clam was small because I had learned the hard way that if the piece is too big the Porgies simply nibble and make you shout out inappropriate language. Finally, I attached the all-important weight at the bottom of the line to get the bait down to porgies, which are bottom feeders.

Everything indicated a successful outcome. The gray sky meant the fish surely would not retreat to deeper waters. The epic tide meant the fish surely would be guided to my perfect trap. The way I had lovingly and perfectly prepared my line meant the fish surely would be helpless and would practically leap into the small cooler I had brought in anticipation of my large catch...

And, of course, two hours later, that same cooler remained painfully empty.

I prayed. God, I prayed. "Dear Lord, let not all my efforts be in vain!"

But nothing happened. The fish did not appear. I sat in my dismay. I thought that nothing could get worse.

But then it did.

Right about the time I began composing a hymn in my head dedicated to my fishing failure, a group of men showed up not even 30 feet from my spot. They, too, had lovingly prepared their lines. They, too, had selected the time because of the tide and the overcast conditions. It looked as if they and me were just alike. But that didn't last very long.

Because after a short period, they caught a fish.

And then one fish, turned into two fish, which shortly turned into half a dozen fish. Pretty soon, I kid you not, they were hauling the fish in two and three at a time. These people were not even a stone's throw away and they were hitting the jackpot!

You know those cartoons where the character gets really angry and a train whistle goes off and smoke comes shooting out of their ears? Yeah, I was doing that internally. Why internally, you ask? For two reasons. First of all, Jesus taught us to love our enemies - even those enemies that catch all the fish you aren't. Secondly, I haven't been in the Shelter Island police blotter and I'd prefer to keep it that way.

I was angry. Angry and frustrated. Frustrated and forlorn. Forlorn and lost. You could see it in my body posture. Whereas I had entered the beach with a confident stride in my step, I eventually gave up and left it with my head bowed, my shoulders down, and my stride weak. What a waste.

I wonder if that's how Peter felt after he decided to go fishing that night with the disciples.

Peter and the other disciples had gathered by the sand. They must have felt as if they had done everything right. They had followed Jesus. They had listened to his teachings. They had joined him in healing and feeding people. All of the indicators pointed to success.

And yet, all of those preparations had only led to a deadly cross. Their hopes had been crushed. Their dreams diminished. Their beloved savior had died.

And along the way, Peter had denied Christ not once, not twice, but three times. Peter, whose heart was always in the right place, was the first to deny Christ. Peter hadn't spoken to him since.

Sure, they had heard of his resurrection, but what did that *really* mean? A few of them had met the risen Christ, but not Peter. He had not spoken to Christ - either "pre" or "post" resurrection - since he had denied him those three dreadful times by that charcoal fire outside Pilate's headquarters where Jesus was being interrogated and flogged.

Peter must have wondered where he and Jesus "stood" with one another. Was Jesus angry with him? Did Jesus plan on punishing Peter for his cowardice? Was Peter to no longer to enjoy the fellowship of his beloved friend?

These uncomfortable questions lingered in Peter's mind that day as he sat by the shore with his fellow disciples. I suppose he had two choices: either continue sitting and ponder these terrible questions, or, to go fishing. Peter chose the latter. He chose to press the "reset button" and return to the activity he was doing when he first met Jesus by that same seashore.

Slapping his hands on his knees, Peter exhaled and stood up saying, "I am going fishing."

The other disciples got up and followed Peter to the boat. And, together, they had an experience eerily similar to mine that day at Reel Point here on Shelter Island.

They lovingly prepared their nets. They chose the evening because the fish are more likely to come to the surface in the cooler temperatures. They, like me, probably chose their favorite fishing spot that had proven success many times prior. But...

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Throughout the entire night, they did not catch one fish. They had made all the preparations. They had done everything "right." They were no strangers to this way of life. It was the one thing they knew well. The routine of fishing brought them comfort amidst the traumatic experiences of the past few weeks.

But to no avail. The fish remained uncaught.

As the morning sun began to shed its light upon their frustrated faces, the light illumined a stranger upon the beach, yelling out to them.

"Children, you have no fish, have you?" he asked.

"Thank you for reminding us of that sobering fact, captain obvious!" they replied.

Choosing to ignore their sarcasm, the stranger told them to cast their nets on the other side.

Well, they thought, what have we got to lose? They did as the stranger instructed and, lo and behold, the fish were so many that they struggled to even haul the net inside the boat.

As I learned that day by Reel Point in my fishing adventure, sometimes just a few feet can make quite the difference!

And as they brought in the fish too numerous to count, they recognized the stranger as the Risen Jesus. Quickly they turned the boat around to join their friend by the sand. But Peter could not wait. Peter jumped from the boat and began swimming toward Jesus.

He must have looked ridiculous when he reached the shore - breathless, soaking wet, stinking of fish. As Peter caught his breath, he noticed something that he hadn't noticed from the boat: a charcoal fire.

Isn't it curious how something so seemingly insignificant as a charcoal fire can trigger such a powerful memory? Immediately, without warning, Peter was transported back to the last time he stood by a charcoal fire. It was the night he had denied knowing Christ three times.

Shame in the form of a lump in his throat grew as Peter wondered what was coming next. Was Jesus to publicly shame him for his treachery? Was he about to get his punishment in the form of excommunication from Jesus' circle of friends?

Instead of words of anger, the first words Peter heard from his Risen Savior were words of welcome. "Come and have breakfast," Jesus said.

Silently, Peter obeyed and allowed himself to be fed by his Savior.

After they had finished eating, Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him. All three times, Peter replied in the affirmative. The three times of Peter's denial had been - through the grace of Jesus - replaced by the three answers of love from Peter's mouth.

Friends, like the disciples, you and I are still learning what the Resurrection means for us and our lives. Like Peter, we wonder if our past sins are capable of separating us from the life of the risen Christ. But what we find is that instead of another wall being built, another table has been set. What we find is that nothing can separate us from the love of God. What we find is that sometimes, newness is only lying a few feet away on the shore.

But sometimes we can get to a place where a few feet can seem like many miles. When I was sitting by Reel Point, even though those men were only a few feet away from me, the fish might as well have been 50 miles away.

However, the Risen Christ calls us to keep pressing on. The Risen Christ calls us to adjust our gaze and cast nets elsewhere. The Risen Christ calls us to live in the light of forgiveness, and resurrection, and renewal.

For what was once dead is now alive. The fish that before were free have now been caught.

So friends, I'm going fishing again. The only thing keeping me from fishing is for the temperature to rise and the fish to return. And when I do return to fishing, with my brand-new rod I received as a Christmas present, I am going to try a different spot. I'm going to try a different spot because I know that sometimes we waste a lot of time fishing on the wrong side of the boat. I hope that we, like Peter, can be attentive to the places in our lives that need a redirection that we might be in a better posture to recognize the Risen Christ and his renewal in our lives.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.