Living the Resurrection

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John 21:1-14

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together for the World:
Gospel Endings

I love Easter. It is my favorite day of the year as we celebrate Jesus’ victory over sin and death with lilies, music, and all the gusto we can muster. But then comes Monday morning, and it’s back to life as we know it. Many of us might be left wondering, What difference does the resurrection really make in my everyday, ordinary life?

This is an important question, and that’s why, during this Easter season, we as a church are going to be focusing on the Gospel endings. These texts contain the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, and they really clarify our calling to follow Jesus as his disciples. And they speak to us about the difference the resurrection is to make in our everyday, ordinary lives. Our text for this morning is one of my favorites.

I have been thinking about what the disciples must have been feeling after seeing Jesus die in such a brutal way and then witnessing his resurrection three days later; it’s hard to imagine. It must have been like grieving the death of a loved one followed three days later by the joy of celebrating a family event like a wedding.

As I was trying to imagine what the disciples must have been experiencing, I remembered the summer before my senior year of college. My twin sister got married that June. This is the person I had shared my entire life with, as we weren’t just roommates, we were “womb mates.” We had even gone to the same college, lived on the same dorm floor, and ended up sharing an apartment. I knew her fiancé well, and I was so happy for her and excited about their new life together. But at the same time, I felt very sad, because they were moving to Texas after their wedding. So, for the first time in our lives, my twin sister and I would be separated by distance and unable to see each other regularly. Her wedding was bittersweet for me—joy for her new life but a sense of grief that we would not be near each other. I wouldn’t have the chance to drop in on her or simply share a meal whenever I wanted.

The sadness of my sister’s move was overshadowed two months later by the sudden death of my older brother, who was killed in an Air Force jet crash. For two months, I was trying to adjust to the idea of not having my sister around, but it turned out it was my brother whom I would not see
again—at least not until heaven. It was a summer of extreme highs and lows for me and my entire family—a summer that changed the experience of our family forever.

For both funerals and weddings, it’s common to gather together and spend time recounting the stories and remembering the significant events and experiences. But at some point, after the funeral or wedding, what do you do? You go back to life as you know it. You return to the ordinary routines, places, and circumstances of life.

So when fall came around, I drove away from home to resume my studies and to finish my college education. I remember that day very clearly, because it seemed so strange to be going on with my life as if nothing had changed but with this deep awareness that really everything had changed. My life would never be the same.

I don’t know for sure, but I can imagine that is some of what is happening in this scene. The disciples have returned from the highs and lows of their experience in Jerusalem. Jesus had instructed them to return to Galilee, promising that he would come to them. Mind you, this is a distance of 70 miles, so it would have taken some days to walk there. And think of all that these disciples had to talk about on the way.

So here they are in Galilee. This is home. This is where they made a living and raised families. This is where the disciples met Jesus. The slides that have been the backdrop for today’s service were taken when a group of us from VPC traveled to Israel a year and a half ago. Our time around Galilee was my favorite part of the trip, because this is where Jesus spent most of his time with his disciples in the three years of his public ministry. But this day is different. Jesus is not with them.

So it is really not surprising that Peter decides he is going fishing. He’s going back to work to do what he knows how to do. And the others decide they are going with him. There are seven of them, and whatever they do, they are going to stick together.

John, the Gospel writer, loves to use the imagery of darkness and light, so he makes the point that they have been fishing all night but they are unsuccessful. The text says that they caught nothing. Zip. This is the same Greek word that Jesus uses earlier in John when he says, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” Peter, James and John know how to fish, where to fish, what to do, but all their efforts produce nothing.

And suddenly, just as the day breaks, some person on the shore addresses them: “How’s it going? Have you caught anything?” And they answer, “No.” But this unidentified person directs them, “Cast your net to the right side of the boat, and
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They do it, and there are so many fish they can’t haul them in.

John is now the first one who realizes that this stranger is the resurrected Jesus. And he tells Peter, “It is the Lord!” Without hesitation, Peter dives into the water to swim to greet Jesus, leaving the others to drag in the net full of fish. You have to love it when someone else’s spiritual experience leaves you to do all the work.

This gospel account affirms that the resurrection is meant for our whole lives—not just their spiritual experiences in Jerusalem or ours on Easter Sunday. The resurrection will make a difference in all of our lives—even work. But to bear fruit and catch fish as Jesus wants us to do, we have to let go of our self-sufficiency.

While Jesus affirms that work is important, there is also a warning in this passage because work—whether that work is in the home or outside the home—can often be a place where the wonder and excitement of the resurrection gets choked out of us as we become more competent and gain mastery over ourselves, our abilities and our environments. Knowledge and competence are high values in the workplace. We’re trained and paid to know what we’re doing and to do it well. But often the focus is on us and what we are doing. While we may be very active, busy, and even productive in human terms, the sense of wonder, the experience of Christ’s presence, and the power of the Spirit working in and through us may be absent.

The thing that pulls the disciples away from their inability to accomplish anything on their own is a word from the risen Christ to do something different. They hear him and they do what he says, and the power of God is manifested in this miraculous, abundant catch that they can hardly pull in. The recording of this miracle is given in such detail that we even know the number of fish. The disciples were amazed and filled with wonder with yet another miracle of Jesus doing for them what they could not do for themselves.

We spend a huge hunk of our time each week working. But how do we cultivate the attentiveness, vigilance and sense of wonder that we need so that we can live the reality of the resurrection in our everyday lives? How do we learn to listen to Christ so we can do what he says? I think it takes stepping back from our work. It takes detachment from our work. It means letting go of our self-sufficiency so that we can let God do, in and through and for us, what only he can do.

You may be wondering how we can practically do that. How can we let go and let God? There is not just one answer to that question, but the one I want to lift up today is this:
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keep the Sabbath holy. In his book *Living the Resurrection*, Eugene Peterson says, “Keeping the Sabbath is a day of studied and vowed resistance to doing anything so that we can be free to see and respond to who God is and what he is doing.”

You and I need to recognize what these disciples recognized: There is more to life than work. Above all, there is God. Our work is not our life. Without Sabbath, our work becomes our life. And if we do not cease our work, then work itself becomes an end in itself. Too many of us are like the disciples, spending our time doing what we know how to do, but it is devoid of wonder and joy and life.

We need to experience the reality of the risen Christ every day. The early church felt the resurrection was so significant they changed the Christian Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday so that we could continue to recognize and celebrate the resurrection every week. It’s not that Sunday is holier than the other six days. It just means that if all seven days blend into one another, then our lives as a whole are diminished. But if we live each week with this sacred rhythm of six days of work and one day of rest, we are better able to recognize the presence of Christ with us, to listen to his voice, and depend on his power to do for us what we can’t do for ourselves.

I think it was the year after my brother died and my sister got married that I really began to practice Sabbath-keeping. It was a difficult discipline to employ at first, because there always seemed to be more to do than I had time to do. I found I really had to rearrange my schedule and use my time well to get my studying done. I often studied all day Saturday, and if I had a test on Monday, I would get up at 3:00 a.m. on Monday morning to study. But surprisingly, I didn’t experience this as a burden but as freedom, because for one day a week I really stopped all my doing and even thinking about what I needed to do and simply enjoyed being God’s beloved child.

I have continued to observe Sabbath for almost 30 years—not perfectly but consistently. Times of transition have often found me falling away from this discipline. But I have discovered that when I let go of all that I have to do and obey God’s command to obey Sabbath, I live into my truest identity as the beloved child of God. And I discover that when I do less I actually bear more fruit—the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. I am better able to live out my true vocations as a wife, mother, friend, and pastor.

If you do not practice Sabbath, I want to encourage you to begin by simply setting aside a portion of Sunday to be
Sabbath allows us to recognize who God is and what He is doing and who we are in Him as we stop long enough to see the resurrection wonder.

Let’s get back to the passage. As the disciples get to the shore with all the fish, they discover that breakfast is ready. Jesus has already prepared a meal of fish and bread for them. Once again he provides for them and feeds and nourishes them.

The picture you see is of the church on the location where they believe Jesus appeared to the disciples. This was one of my favorite places on our trip, because I could imagine how much it meant to the disciples to see Jesus again in his resurrected body in this very ordinary and familiar place.

In this is a picture of the inside of the church. I love the juxtaposition of the rock in the foreground, the place where Jesus and the disciples sat and ate this resurrection meal, and the communion table in the background. This picture really emphasizes that the resurrection makes the ordinary holy.

As the disciples are sitting and eating with Jesus again, they must have remembered the miracles they witnessed when Jesus fed the multitudes with a few loaves and fish as he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it for many to eat and be satisfied.

They must have remembered the Last Supper, when Jesus again took the bread, blessed it, broke it and said, “This is my body, broken for you.” Having been through the experiences of the cross and resurrection, they now understand what they could not have understood before: Jesus is the bread of life; he is the single loaf from which all the needs of the world will be met. He is the one loaf of bread; his body was broken for the sins of the many.

Every time we celebrate this sacramental meal, we remember the identity and mission of Jesus. He is the Son of God, whose body was broken for us and whose blood was poured out for us. That four-fold pattern of taking, blessing, breaking and giving the bread is descriptive of Jesus’ identity and mission. But it is also descriptive of our identity, mission, and calling.

The disciples were chosen by Jesus to be his disciples. They were called to follow him. And they were blessed because they had three years to listen to his teaching, to witness his miracles, and to experience the joy of his presence and the
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blessing of his love. But they were broken, too, as they failed Jesus by deserting and denying him. They came to see that they were not as good as they believed themselves to be. They came to understand the depth of their sinfulness and why Jesus needed to die for them. But Jesus takes all of this—their successes, their failures, their strengths and weaknesses, and transforms them. It is his intention to give them to the world to be his witnesses, to be fishers of people, to bear fruit in the world. And we know from the Book of Acts that these disciples are not the same men we see in the Gospels. They have been transformed, and they do change the world. The difference for them is that they came to the end of themselves, and they learned to rely on the grace of Christ and the power of the Spirit. And their ordinary, everyday lives were never the same. And the world was never the same either.

It was during my college years that I began to really understand that I had been chosen by God—not because of my worthiness but because of his sovereignty and faithfulness and love. In those college years, I was truly blessed as I learned to study the Bible and pray, as I became a part of a small group, and as I took advantage of every opportunity I could to learn more about God and life in Him. I established sacred rhythms that nurtured my relationship with God and cultivated a deep sense of God’s presence in my life and a deep awareness of His love, His grace, His power.

But it was also in college that I experienced the deep brokenness that I spoke of earlier. Those experiences of grief became the very place where God transformed me. I came to understand that God was not what I thought he was, that he would not always do what I expected. And I also learned I was not who I thought I was. But God took my brokenness and pain and used it to help me see Him more clearly and to experience more deeply His love for me.

Out of that brokenness he gave me a sense of calling—a vision for how he was giving me back to the world to be his servant in the world. Jesus takes our brokenness and transforms it for his glory and uses it for his good.

I share my experience as an illustration, but I encourage you to think about your life. When did God first take you or choose you to be His child? What are the experiences in which He has blessed you? What are the experiences of brokenness in which He has transformed you? How is He calling you to give you back to the world to love others as He has loved you?

When Jesus ascended to heaven, he was no longer present in his resurrected body,
We are Christ’s body in all the ordinary, everyday places of lives—our homes, our work, our neighborhoods.

but he left the disciples to be his body on earth. As this bread is broken in many pieces to feed us, so we go from this place scattered to be the presence of Christ to the world. Think of it. We are Christ’s body in all the ordinary, everyday places of lives—our homes, our work, our neighborhoods.

So as we come to this table, let us remember Jesus taken, blessed, broken and given to the world. But let us also offer our very selves to Christ as he wants to take, bless, break and give us as his body on earth. The prayer of St. Theresa of Avila is a fitting reminder and benediction as we go from the table back to our ordinary, everyday lives.

Christ has no body now but yours;
No hands but yours; no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world.
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless all the world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.