

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 4, 2025**

**“Just After Daybreak”
John 21:1-19**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Our Gospel Lesson brings us to the last chapter of the Gospel of John—and it begins with three little words: “after these things” (v. 1). Talk about understatement! The Son of God took on human flesh and frailty in the incarnation, taught and healed and showed God’s love, gave up his life for the life of the world, then rose to new life in the resurrection... “[A]fter these things,” indeed!

So much has happened; so much has changed... And yet, after all this, the disciples seem to be at a loss of what to do. Christ is Risen...but they’re not quite sure what to do next. So, as it turns out, they go right back to what they know best: a group of disciples return to the Sea of Tiberias, better known as the Sea of Galilee—right back to where they were when Jesus first called them by the seashore.

They go right back to where they were at the beginning—and they pick up exactly where they left off. John writes: “Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you’” (v. 3). They return immediately to their former life! This scene, it’s like the calling of the disciples—but in reverse: they go back to what they were doing before as if nothing had changed. ‘Gee, that was an eventful few years... Well, back to square one, I guess... I wonder if our boats are still where we left them? I wonder if our nets are still where we dropped them?’ They have met the Risen Christ, but they go back to their old patterns as if none of all that mattered: they go on like Easter had never happened (cf. Sloyan).

But notice: it doesn’t work anymore! They try to go right back to the way things were before, but it turns out that won’t cut it now. “They went out and got into the boat,” John writes, “but that night they caught nothing” (v. 3). They remain out on the water for a long, cold, frustrating night—but it just won’t work. And these are not novice fishermen: these are seasoned experts who “knew the sea,” who knew where to find the fish (Wright). And yet, what worked before simply does not work anymore. They fall back on their old tricks, but it’s useless: after a

long night of dredging their nets, their entire haul consists of nothing more than Styrofoam cups and old toilet seat.

You can just feel their frustration here: a long night on a dark boat—and nothing; a long night of cold, wet, blistered hands—and nothing; a long night of doing the one thing they're supposed to be good at—and nothing. It's been a long and empty night....then, just as a new day begins to dawn, the Risen Christ appears on the shore. But now that they've put all their attention back into fishing, they don't even recognize him! "Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach," John tells us; "but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus" (v. 4).

So when Jesus speak to them across the water, they respond like he's just some unwelcome stranger—and they're not particularly happy with what he asks. In response to his question, they return a one-word answer through gritted teeth. John writes: "Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No'" (v. 5).

Yet, as the sun continues to rise and brighten the scene, and the disciples begin to see things a little differently in this warmer light, Jesus gives them a command, saying: "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some" (v. 6). Now they really don't have much reason to listen to this random stranger; but—after a night of going it alone, and failing—they're receptive, it seems, to a different way of doing things. Sometimes failure can make us a bit more open to listen...so—though they still don't recognize the Risen Lord—they obey his command.

And the moment they obey him, listen to how things start to change: "So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. [...] 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 [...]; 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" (vv. 6, 9-13).

Can you feel the sudden change in the story? As the new day dawns, and they listen to the calling of the Risen Christ, there's this transformation from frustration to excitement, from emptiness to plenty, from the cold scene on the water to the warmth by the fire, from the darkness of a long night to the bright morning of a new day. The disciples had tried to move on with their lives, almost

as if Easter had never happened—but that led to a frustrating dead end. Then the Risen Christ appears, gives them a new command, and—as they obey him—there is a sudden opening for joy. Sometimes we can learn from our failures—and a long, cold, fishless night was just the sort of failure that opened the disciples unexpectedly to listen again for Christ’s Word.

When I reflect on this story, I think about how it mirrors us. Easter has happened; the tomb is empty; Christ is Risen...but how has this transformed *our* lives? Easter changes everything; yet do we, like the disciples, try to move on as if everything’s the same? Does Easter reshape our thoughts, our hopes, our dreams, our relationships, our families, our finances? Or do we try to go on like nothing has really changed—like Easter is just a day on the calendar rather than the life-changing source of all our hope?

Back on the seashore, with the Risen Christ, the disciples are beginning to find their place again in a world where Christ is Risen, where death does not have the final say, where hope is born of the grace of God... And it’s there that they receive a new calling; in the same place where they had once been called to drop their nets and follow Jesus, they are called once more.

John writes: “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’” (vv. 15-17). And then—after foretelling how Peter would die—Jesus says, once more by the sea, “Follow me” (v. 19).

There was a kind of inwardness in the way the disciples had moved on from Easter, back to their boat. It was insular and isolating: they’d left behind the wider community of disciples; they left them all behind and went, as a small group, to their own little boat. Yet after that night of frustration, and in that dawn with the Risen Christ, they hear again their deeper calling—their calling to follow Jesus together into the ways of compassion. Christ, who called them before, calls them again; Easter means new life for Christ and a new calling for his disciples.

And I wonder if today, we—like those disciples—can hear the calling of the Risen Christ again, the calling to share in Christ’s compassion, to share in the

compassion that Christ revealed to us in his life, in his death, and in his risen life.
Amen.