

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”

“No,” they answered.

⁶ He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.”

¹¹ Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:1-14)

It is the Lord!

In 1989, the movie *Back to the Future II* came out and portrayed life in 2015. It seemed to promise that we’d have flying cars and self-lacing tennis shoes by then. Now, it’s not quite 2015 yet, but I don’t think I’ll be buying a flying car any time soon. But the self-lacing tennis shoes are kind of an interesting, because some fans thought that was real in 1989. In 2010, someone even developed a kind of self-tying shoe and Nike bought the patent, but they never put them into production. The shoes in the movie are not real today and they may never be. What’s real and what isn’t? Sometimes, it’s hard to tell. Sometimes, we know something in our head, but on a gut level, we don’t accept it or we struggle to come to terms with it. In our gospel lesson for today, we see Jesus’ disciples in the weeks after Easter, weeks that forced them to understand their Lord and their faith in a new way. We see Jesus helping them to wrap their heads around what was true and real. What he was working to do is summed up in the flash of recognition that John voiced when he said, **“It is the Lord!”**

I.

Sometimes we have to get used to an idea. Several weeks ago, I bought a new car. For a while, the family joke was that dad had “car amnesia” because I kept going out into parking lots and looking for the wrong car. It’s human nature for us to get stuck thinking along one specific line of thought and we have trouble when life wrenches us in a different direction. Well, what could possibly have wrenched the disciples’ line of thought more than Jesus rising from the dead? John’s exclamation was part of the process God used to change the way they thought. **It is the Lord! Jesus proved that it really was him!**

Even though Jesus had risen, he wasn’t walking along with the disciples every day like he used to. He had told them to wait until they were clothed with power from on high. They were waiting for the day of Pentecost. So Peter decided to go fishing. Remember, Peter and his brother Andrew and James and John had been professional fishermen before Jesus called them to be disciples. Did the seven disciples who were gathered on this day feel a need to do something useful? Were they getting restless? Did they need to make a few dollars? The Bible doesn’t really tell us. Whatever their reason, they went out and fished all night. But they didn’t catch anything. When the sun came up, they saw Jesus standing on the shore, but they didn’t realize him. He called out to them, **“Friends, haven’t you any fish?”** When they said no, he said, **“Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.”** And sure enough, as soon as they switched to the other side, their nets were full.

Does that story sound familiar to you? It felt familiar to the disciples. Way back at the beginning of their time with Jesus, they had been out fishing all night and hadn’t caught anything. And Jesus told them to try

the other side of the boat. When they did, they caught so many fish that their nets began to break. When they got to shore, Peter had said, **“Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.”** That’s when Jesus had promised that they would be fishers of men.

That was three years before this moment. When Jesus did this miracle, John said to Peter, **“It is the Lord!”** Jesus could have done any miracle he wanted to do that day. But he chose to do a miracle that ran parallel to the first miracle he had done with these men to show them that it was still him, even after dying and rising. John says at the end of our reading, **“This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.”** When they got up on shore they didn’t need to ask who he was; they all knew it was Jesus. That was a huge improvement over Easter evening when they thought he was a ghost and he had to prove he had a physical body. Now, they knew and accepted who he was. But Jesus did appear to them this third time and he would appear more times over the next three or four weeks. Why? To make it clear for all time that this was no fairy tale. This was no illusion or moment of mass hysteria. This was no case of mistaken identity. This was no invented story. Jesus was alive. There were eye-witnesses who saw him and tell us that truth.

Do you realize how important that is? Today, so many people deny the physical resurrection of Christ. Groups like the Jehovah’s Witnesses insist that it was a spiritual resurrection. His body remained in the grave – as if that were any kind of a resurrection at all. Even mainstream Christians will make that kind of claim. I’ve read of bishops making comments like, “The disciples pinched the body.” In many seminaries, pastors are taught that the early church preached that Jesus rose, and that’s what’s important. Notice, they leave out any real declaration that he rose. In fact, they wind up saying that Jesus’ resurrection really happens in your heart when you have a personal encounter with Christ. Of course, unbelieving society simply denies the resurrection. Sometimes, it does that in a very subtle way. How many of you use Google? Most of us enjoy the clever things they do with their logo on special days. But did you see what they did for the Google logo on Easter Sunday? They had a tribute to Caesar Chavez, because it was his birthday. That was the important thing being celebrated that day.

Jesus’ resurrection is constantly under attack. And God knew that would happen. So he entrusted the gospel to eyewitnesses. The power is in the message those witness proclaim. You and I don’t have to see the risen Savior to believe in him. The Holy Spirit works through the gospel to give us faith. But what is the gospel? At its heart it’s these three words: Jesus is risen. God sent the disciples to proclaim that fact. Not that rumor. He sent them to proclaim what they knew. What they had seen. What is true for all time: Jesus rose.

Because he rose, we will rise. That message is more than just something for pastors to get worked up about. I know it sometimes seems like we pastors get worked up about things that don’t relate to modern life. And because we’re sinners, too, that probably is true sometimes. But Jesus’ resurrection is the heart and soul of our faith. St. Paul said that if Christ is not raised your faith is futile – it’s useless, it accomplishes nothing. He said that if Christ is not raised, you are still in your sins. Jesus rose because that was the only way to set us free from sin. I am going to die some day, unless Jesus comes back first. So are you. Our own sin kills us. But Jesus died and paid for that sin. He rose so we will rise. He rose so our own sin doesn’t win. And he showed himself alive to these men because they were his chosen instruments to carry that message to the whole world.

II.

Jesus carefully chose where and how he would reveal himself to the disciples. This whole story is a quiet interlude between dramatic scenes. In the chapters before this, we have Jesus’ death and resurrection. After this comes the book of Acts with the Ascension and the day of Pentecost when these very disciples speak in tongues and then the gospel spreads by leaps and bounds. Between those events, we have this quiet day by the seashore. It’s a day of Jesus ministering to the men who will be ministers. That begins when they recognize him. **It is the Lord! Jesus prepared his disciples to serve.**

For the last couple of weeks, they had been on an emotional rollercoaster. They marched into Jerusalem in triumph. They ate the last Passover meal and Jesus instituted communion. Then he was arrested and tried and tortured. All those people who had cheered him cried for his blood and most of the disciples ran away. Peter even denied him. Jesus was executed and buried and the disciples plunged into the depths of despair, only to hear that he had risen. Then they saw him, twice. Then he told them to wait for power from on high.

How much emotion can the human heart take? They swung from joy to sorrow to confusion to joy to waiting. Jesus gave them this time to heal and to grow. And on this day, we see how carefully Jesus tended to

them. First he did that miracle that clearly identified who he is. But then when these men came up on shore, what did they find? A fire with fish and bread cooking. Jesus invited them to come and eat. I know it's a little thing. But these men had worked through the night. Commercial fishing was hard, physical labor. You had to row the boats. You had to drag large nets through the water on pure muscle power. And doing that for hour after hour and catching nothing is discouraging. Jesus showed how much he loved them. He had breakfast ready for bone weary, hungry men.

Jesus had more business to do with them than just provide breakfast. This was the visit when he reinstated Peter as an apostle. No doubt, he took the time to teach and to counsel them. They had six weeks from Easter to Pentecost to understand what had happened, six weeks before the Holy Spirit would come and they would begin their life's work. As he had for the last three years, Jesus prepared them for ministry. On this occasion, part of that preparation was caring for their hearts and their souls as they dealt with all the emotion of Holy Week.

They needed that care because these men were sinners just like we are. To be Jesus' witnesses, they needed a faith that had been tested by adversity and that had been strengthened by the gospel. The gospel is what Jesus brought them when he showed himself to them. He was showing them that sin and death don't win. He was showing them that they were going to have life eternal. He was assuring them that all their failures during Holy Week were wiped away and he still loved them. They were still his chosen instruments to proclaim the gospel.

My friends, we all need spiritual care. Sometimes, parents or siblings or Christian friends can provide it. They listen to us and comfort us and remind us of God's love and Christ's promises. But sometimes, we need pastors. There's an old German term for what a pastor's job really is: *Seelsorger*. A Seelsorger is someone who takes care of souls. That's what God called me to do here at Peace, to take care of your souls. One way I do it is like this. I preach and teach and show you Jesus. But sometimes, we need something more personal. That's why pastors go to hospitals and funeral homes and living rooms. Like Jesus' disciples, we all need to hear about God's love when life hurts, when we're on an emotional rollercoaster, when we can't make sense out of what God is doing.

Have you ever thought about the fact that pastors and teachers need that care too? If Jesus' disciples needed him to assure them that they were forgiven and to help them wrap their heads around all that had happened and all that it meant, don't you think that your pastors and teachers need that, too? We're sinners just like they were. We need the same gospel and the same care for our souls that you do. That's why all teachers are members of congregations and have pastors. That's why in our church body, pastors have circuit pastors. That's why we go to conferences and circuit meetings – to grow and to be cared for spiritually. And don't forget that just as God calls us to care for you, he calls you to care for your pastors and teachers. When you point us back to Christ and you encourage us to remain faithful to our calling, you remind us of God's love and give us his power to serve him.

In the end, whether we're pastors or teachers or members, we all need the same thing: we need the gospel because we all feel guilty some days. We all sin every day. We all struggle with things that hurt and we all get frustrated and confused and down. There is only one cure for our hearts. There is only one way to care for souls: through the good news that Jesus died and now he lives. Because he lives, all our sin is gone forever. Because he lives, we see that God has power over all the hurt and sorrow that sin causes in our lives. Because he lives, we have God's promise that everything we face will work for our ultimate good. Because he lives, we know that he calls pastors and teachers to care for our souls and he has built his Holy Spirit into the gospel that they bring to us. Because he lives, we live now by faith. That faith is the key to wrapping our heads around all that we face here. Because he lives, we will live with him forever. Amen.