

Sermon for Sunday, April 10, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

The gospel has ended
the story of Jesus is done.
The gospeller, John,
has recorded those things
that he thinks are most important for people to hear -
changing water into wine,
a conversation with a woman by a well,
Lazarus raised,
stories of shepherds
and discourses on love,
washing feet,
prayers for his followers,
a breath of the Spirit -
John has told these things
so that those who hear them
can come to know the Savior
that he has come to know,
Jesus Christ.

Twenty chapters long,
beginning in the beginning,
“In the beginning was the word...”
and ending “so that you may come to believe”
and invites us to faith.

And then there’s a postscript.
“After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias.”

Perhaps
it’s that he suddenly remembers
a story he wants to tell

but forgot along the way - and with the cost of parchment
and the time it's taken him
to write everything down so far
he doesn't want
to begin over again.
Or perhaps it's that
he wants to signal
that deciding to follow Jesus
is not the end
but the beginning.

Whatever the reason,
after a nice tidy conclusion to it all
at the end of John, chapter 20,
here we are in John, chapter 21.
And we're back up north
at the Sea of Galilee.
Or the Sea of Tiberias,
as it was also known,
named for the Roman town
that still sits on the shore.

And already we have a signal.
Jesus is dead.
The Romans have won.
The disciples go back
to their old life,
all they had ever known
before they met
Jesus.

Because in the end
all that resurrection stuff,
it just isn't the same
as when Jesus
was with them.
He's said
that he is going to the Father;
he's promised them
the Holy Spirit.

But all they care about
is that he
is gone.
And with him,
all their dreams
and hopes.
All they have left
is memories.

And so
they travel back
to Galilee,
the place where they were born,
the place they had lived
their whole lives
until Jesus showed up
and dragged them away
from their fishing boats.

The boats are still there,
the nets need a mending
but are soon as good
as they always were;
their fishing skills
a little rusty;
but they set out anyway.
Night is always quiet on the lake;
the moon casting
just enough light
to see the shadows
of other boats,
and reflected in water so still
it could be glass.
Their nets barely raise a ripple
as they throw them up high
to fall in a circle
drawing closed like a purse
to trap the fish.
Time after time
they throw them;

time after time
they come back empty.
And as the dark
fades to pale gray
and a mist rises off the water,
their minds foggy with lack of sleep
and stomachs anxious
because without fish
there will be no dinner tonight
and no money for flour for bread,
and through the haze
they see a stranger standing
on the shore.
Tired from a hours staring into the darkness.
absorbed in their work,
they hear him call to them,
“Got any fish?”
– just a casual question
from a hungry passer-by
looking for breakfast –
“got any fish?”

“No!” they shout.
“No luck yet.”

“Why don’t you try
the other side?”
he calls out.

Now you know
as well as I do
that a few feet of boat-shadowed water
is no barrier
to a fish,
and if there are no fish
on one side,
likely as not
there won’t be any
on the other side wither.
But they’ve been fishing all night

and have caught nothing at all,
and so it seems like this
is as good an idea
as any.

So they haul up the nets,
heavy and wet,
and throw them over
the other side
of the boat.

And suddenly
they are filled with fish,
not just a few,
but overflowing,
more than they would expect to catch
in a week of fishing.

And then they begin to remember...
It was just like
the other time,
back, the very first time
they met Jesus.
That time too
they fished all night
and their nets were still empty,
that time too
a stranger
was standing
on the shore.
That time too,
he called out to them, ‘Throw your nets
over the other side’;
that time too
their nets had come up
full of fish.
They begin to remember...
It was Jesus, then,
that stranger,
whose advice

filled their nets
could it be
that this stranger, too,
was their Lord?

“It’s the Lord”
they whisper excitedly to one another.
“It’s him. He hasn’t abandoned us. He’s here,
just as he said!”

And Peter, impetuous as usual
tucks up his clothes
jumps over the side of the boat
and wades
back to the beach.

You heard the rest of the story.
The boat makes it safely
to shore,
they haul in and count the catch,
one hundred fifty-three fish in all -
enough for dinner that night, and the next, and the next,
food for the best part of a month -
and Jesus and his disciples
share bread and grilled fish
for breakfast.

A meal
in the presence
of the risen Lord.

The disciples
go fishing.
Old habits
die hard.

Easter is such a high point on the church’s calendar.
We prepare with penitence,
we mourn our Savior’s death.
We celebrate his resurrection.

There's so much
anticipation;
but now it's over.
The prayer book might tell us
it's still the Easter season,
but the world around us
tells us Easter is over,
and with it
the joy
and the celebration
and the hope.

We go back
to what we know; we return
to our routines.

And to some extent
that's a good thing.
We can't spend our whole lives
in the intensity of Holy Week and the Triduum.
The washing
still needs to be done,
there are letters to be written
and meals to be cooked
and bills to be paid.

But there's also a danger. Because not all
the old routines
are healthy ones.
We recognize that
when we take on Lenten disciplines.
The idea of Lenten disciplines
at its root,
is not just
that deprivation leads to holiness,
its that there are things in our lives
which get in the way
of us serving God,
there are things in our lives
which get in the way

of us imitating Christ.
We try to put those things aside in Lent,
so that we might be
formed and reshaped and remade
more and more in the image of Christ.
And hopefully
that doesn't end
with Lent
– its part of a transformation
which last
the whole of our lives.

But Easter comes and goes, and it's so easy
just to fall back
into the old patterns.
Like the disciples
after the high point
of resurrection,
when life has returned to normal
and we can no longer see so clearly
the presence of God,
its all too easy
to go back to the way
things always were.
As if
it had never been
any
other
way.

Old routines, old habits – they always catch us out, don't they?
As individuals
and as communities as well.

We return to them
as places of safety,
but they can also be destructive places, destructive to ourselves
and to one another.
Old hurts and aches take over,
and we forget God's promises

of healing and forgiveness, we forget
Christ's call to us
to forgive and heal.

But as the disciples found out
Jesus is not content
to leave us
back where we were.
Things are not as they used to be,
the past does not set the future in stone.

Christ has died,
Christ has risen, Christ will come again!
Week by week
we proclaim the mystery of faith;
week by week
we know
the presence of Christ
as we gather around the table
to share the bread of life
and the cup of salvation.

And that is the same Christ
who called to the disciples across the sea of Galilee,
who didn't leave them
back at their fishing,
but called them on
to go build the church.
We
are their legacy;
we
are living proof
that the death and resurrection of Christ
was not in vain,
that the death and resurrection of Christ
was the beginning of something new.

Christ's death and resurrection
have changed the way the world works
and us with it.

We are called
to live in the light of Easter, not only
for our annual celebration,
but day by day, week by week.
We live
as people of the resurrection.
Turning away from the forces of evil and death,
claiming
and proclaiming
new life,
offering the healing and forgiveness
which we have received
to one another
and to the world.

And when we feel
the flatness
of the post-Easter letdown,
when we feel trapped
by old habits, old routines,
Christ calls us
to share in the meal
where he is always present,
to break the bread of life,
to draw strength from his strength,
to allow the healing and forgiveness
which flows from his death
and his resurrected life
flow into us,
into our community,
into our world.
People of the resurrection,
we proclaim
Christ has died,
Christ is risen,
Christ will come again!