

“Encore”
April 18, 2010
3rd Sunday of Easter
John 21:1-19

"Encore"

I had known it before, I guess, but it struck me this time, when I came to this story of the risen Jesus appearing to seven of his disciples by the Sea of Tiberius, here in the 21st chapter of John, that this scene is really an epilogue to John's gospel. The verses just before it, at the end of chapter 20, conclude John's telling of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus with these words: *“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.”*

And then, it's as if the writer is saying, “Oh, and one more thing. . .” He goes on to say, “Jesus showed himself again to the disciples . . . and this is what happened. . .” The risen Lord had already appeared to them, twice, and once to Mary, as John tells it. They had seen, and believed. You'd think, as we might say today: “end of story.” After all, as someone once said, “After the resurrection, what do you do for an encore?” The disciples saw, and believed . . . and then? Back to their fishing, apparently.

There were a lot of folks here on Easter Sunday, as in most churches. But now, a couple of weeks later, the horns have disappeared from the choir loft, along with a few of the voices, the lilies and mums have made their way home with their purchasers, or off to our shut-ins. We're back to our average attendance. Easter added a phrase to the creed: “On the third day he rose (again) from the dead” - we've confessed that he is risen indeed, and we'll keep doing it through this Easter season all the way to Pentecost. But, there's one more thing – one more thing that makes all the difference. It's as if there's been this great concert, and the performers have left the stage at the end but audience isn't ready for it to be over. They whistle and clap and shout “encore.” What sort of finale would add anything to the resurrection?

That's what this story at the end of John's gospel is about. At the beginning of this epilogue the disciples have left Jerusalem and are gathered by the Sea of Galilee (Tiberias). Simon Peter is there, along with Thomas, Nathanael, James and John, and “two others of his disciples.” The writer doesn't say why they are there; they seem to be waiting for something, or someone. Simon Peter says, “I'm going fishing.” The others decide they'll go with him. Remember, they've seen the Lord, and believed. But what now? We've sung, “Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia,” and then Monday came, then Tuesday, and Wednesday . . . We returned to our lives, which is what the disciples did. We can only imagine the impact it had on them to see their friend and Lord alive again after he'd

been as dead as you can get. All we have is their word for it, coming to us through an ancient book and centuries of tradition. That's all we have – unless there is something more, unless it's not “end of story.”

They went out fishing, and that night they caught nothing. According to Luke's story of Jesus, this is how it started with them, at the beginning of their journey with Jesus. They couldn't catch a thing, and Jesus said to try again, out deeper. Against their better judgment, they did, and they could barely make it back to shore, the catch was so big. Here at the end of the story there is the whiff of another beginning, a new start. A lot of water had gone under the bridge since those heady, early days of the journey. Particularly for Simon Peter, whose three-fold betrayal of his Lord was still there, stinging his soul, weighing on his heart, even after he'd seen and believed. When the going got tough, he got going, in the opposite direction. But when a stranger on the beach, just as the sun was rising, called out and asks them the question all fishermen have heard from the shore, “Caught anything, boys?” They shake their heads. Nothing. “Cast the net on the right side of the boat,” and to humor the stranger they do, resulting in so many fish their nets almost broke. “It's the Lord,” the beloved disciple said to Peter, and Peter, impulsive as ever, throws his clothes on and jumps in the water, swimming to shore while the others follow in the boat, dragging the nets full of fish.

The “something more” is starting to emerge now. Did you ever notice that the disciples never seem to catch any fish until Jesus shows up? Jesus knows where the fish are. Jesus knows where freedom is. Jesus knows where the truth is. Jesus knows where the joy is. And unless we cast our nets in his direction—even if we have seen and have believed — we'll be coming up empty. All too often we try to fish where there are no fish. We try to find contentment and peace where they can't be found. We give heart and soul to pursuits that offer momentary *highs* or temporary gains, that build our self-esteem or give us small samples of pleasure or meet a need that is only our own. And Jesus is there on the shore while we're bobbing about on our own little boats of self-sufficiency. He's there keeping an eye on us, making provisions for us as he was making breakfast for the disciples. And he calls out to us, asking each of “Are you catching anything?” He knows we're coming up empty. “Try the other side.” Try resurrection life.

I think this is a story for those who show up after Easter Sunday - for those who have believed or who struggle to believe (believing is always a struggle). I think it's the gospel for those who know our sin is ever before us, who know that our livelihood, our relationships, our intelligence, our skills, our expertise, even our *spirituality* will never provide for the true provision of our souls. I think it is a gospel for believers who confess with the man in the scriptures, “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.”

Peter probably slowed his stroke as he got close to the shore, closer to Jesus. What will he do when the two of them stand face to face? How will he explain his denial of Jesus - his denial of his calling as a disciple? It must have been an awkward breakfast, where Jesus acted as host. Jesus nods to Peter

and they start off down the beach. “Simon,” Jesus says (using his old name), “do you love me?” Pained by the question he answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” And then Jesus asks it again, and then again. Each time Peter answers with all the sincerity he can muster. He is a believer, after all - he is nothing if not sincere. And each time, Jesus follows his response with a simple command: “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

Most scholars believe —and they’re probably right —that Peter’s threefold profession of his love for Jesus parallels his three-fold denial - “that Jesus is giving Peter the chance to fill the hole he has dug for himself with three huge shovelfuls of love.” (James Sommerville) There is a symmetry here. But there is more than that, and this is what John’s epilogue provides, this is the gospel we need to hear and receive on this third Sunday of Easter - and that is that Jesus is not just bringing Peter back to where he was before. He is moving him beyond that. He looks Peter in the eye and speaks the same words that won him in the first place: “Follow me.”

No judgment, no reminder of his denials, no focusing on the old, but only on the new. It would seem, especially for those who knew him, loved him, and followed him in the flesh - that wanting to be near him, wanting to be fed by him, would be the central thing, the thing they most wanted to hang onto. But like Mary at the tomb, when Jesus said, “Don’t cling to me - I’m going before you,” so with Simon Peter and the others. Now that he’s raised, they can’t be with him in the same way. They can only be with him by being with others in the way that he was with others: by feeding, tending, teaching, helping, healing.

He gave them fish and bread to eat—and the church has been eating together in his name ever since —the sacrament of bread and cup is one with the ministry of feeding and tending and healing and helping. He is as near as he was on that seashore as we extend our hands and hearts in his name toward others. Out of resurrection comes church—ecclesia— which means those who are “called out” from the world and sent back into the world as disciples of the living one. Out of resurrection comes life that is new by our giving ourselves to it, by our coming to the risen one and walking through the door he holds open into a future we cannot see, but into which we can trust he has gone before us, making provision for us, waiting for us on the shore.

At the end of the epilogue to John’s gospel, after Jesus commissions Peter to love him by feeding, tending and loving his sheep, the writer says, “*There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*” Or, it’s as if there was this great concert and the performers have left the stage at the end – and God is standing and clapping and whistling, not ready for it to be finished. We have found ourselves thrust onto the stage, taking up the instruments of resurrection life — feeding, tending, teaching, helping, healing, loving, serving, rejoicing:

“Encore!”