

"DAYBREAK AT THE SHORE, WITH JESUS...

Text: John 21

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I want to warn you about John. He is Inspired of God, a highly revered beloved disciple: dependable, sensible, holy. You can count him to know what is going on, but you have to watch out for old John. When he wrote his Gospel, especially the post-resurrection appearances, well, he likes to keep it simple. His is the most complicated theology of the four Gospel writers, but

he also writes from the kindness of his heart. He wants all of the disciples to come off looking good.

Maybe that is what happens as you grow older. John is writing some sixty, even seventy years, after Jesus lived and died. That is a long time. I have a few friends still around who can talk of the 1930s and 40s, but not that many. One of them I am thinking about now is quieter as they years go by. Most of his rough edges have disappeared: some I remember being knocked off by the misfortunes of time. If he is not yet a peach, at least he does not seem to suck on a lemon before he leaves the house each morning. They asked the Philosopher Santayana once when he grew older what he had learned since he was 25: "Oh, nothing really," he said, "but I tend to say it all in a softer tone of voice." Thoughts come down to a precious few. I mean, there are many ways to get there, most of them just about as good as others.

So I warn you about John. He likes happy endings. Most people do. He likes to tie everything down. He adored the disciples. Thomas, for example, is reconciled to Jesus only in John. He is the one who refused to believe that Christ had risen. But he got a second chance and declared his faith in Christ.

I love the way he does it! The disciples are out in a boat, fishing. They see a man on the shore. It was Jesus, but they did not know that it was Jesus. Why? Luke never tells you why they did not recognize Jesus. Mark apparently never even thought about it. Matthew glosses over it. "Why?" you may ask. Well, John lets you believe that it is early morning and the mist is still on the lake, and Jesus was too far away. Of course they did not know who it was: he was too far away in the morning sea fog. This is a real live Jesus, about to cook them some breakfast.

It is an engaging little story of what happened to the disciples, or seven of them anyway, after the crushing experience of Good Friday, when Jesus died, then all day Saturday, and then the bewildering events on Easter Sunday morning.

Peter and the sons of Zebedee (James and John), and probably Andrew and Philip had gone back up home to Galilee. Nathaniel from Cana, and Thomas, who was possibly from Nazareth,

were apparently their guests. They were most likely at Bethsaida, but at any rate they were on the Galilean Sea, or the Sea of Tiberias, as John calls it, nicknamed by John for the most prominent city on the lake. There really was no Lake Tiberius.

It was a long way from Jerusalem to Tiberius. Try walking 75 miles over rugged terrain and mountainsides. Like, say you had come to Charlotte to hear a Prophet, were disappointed, and had to walk all the way back up to Mt. Airy or Fancy Gap. Travel conditions were of course dreadful. So it probably took the disciples a good while to get there, possibly seven full days of ten miles per day, if not more. The road home from the funeral of one you loved is always a very long trip anyway.

I imagine it got worse when they got there, although John does not tell you. But knowing human nature, in that or any age, what do you think might have happened when the disciples came back home after three years of chasing around the countryside with Jesus? You can guess what their old friends and neighbors might have said: "Hey, lookee here . . . the great adventurers are back again! Hey Jesse, come and see the Zebedee boys, they're back home. Hey, Abe, look who's here, big old bumptious Simon and his stupid little brother. Heard he changed his name to Cephas. Hey Salome, the Jesus freaks are back home and broke. So sorry, lads, I heard what happened in Jerusalem, but I knew it would come to nothing. If you ever need a job, come by and see me some day." Distasteful business that, eating crow, dragging your hopes behind you.

They had shot out after a star, which had blazed its meteoric streak across the skies of all they longed to be, but it had flamed out in a nasty storm outside Jerusalem Friday the week before. Nothing is quite as bad as being made to look like a fool; and they were. Just imagine how down on themselves they were, the worse for their betrayal. The weight of an emotional burden is the heaviest one of all. What fools these dreamers are. . . .

But then I learned long ago, and so did you, that the only ones who make mistakes are those who dare something in the first place. A recluse never makes a fool of himself chasing after saviors of the world. Elder brother types never go broke, never have to live in a pigs' sty in a

foreign land. They never have to crawl home begging forgiveness from their dads.

Cautious folk and cautious churches seldom get in trouble. Bill Coffin once said, "The church which takes a risk is sometimes wrong; but the church which never takes a risk is always wrong." "Those who are down," the shepherd boy sang in Bunyan's, Pilgrim's Progress, "need fear no fall." Play-safers miss out on troubles, but they miss out on the excitement and the joys as well. For everything you get, you give up something else.

So, little wonder that volatile old Simon Peter decided to do something rather than sit around and mope, and ponder all that might have been. He said, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm going fishing." Good therapy, fishermen take note. When you are depressed, when you don't know what to do, when you are tired of everything and everybody, get up off your status quo, and do something.

But watch it . . . there is an added hint of melancholy there. You and I might take an occasional jaunt to a favorite spot on a secret lake or stream. We fish for the fun of it, to get away from it all. It does not matter much if one got away (Sometimes the story is better when one does). No so with Peter. He was a fisherman by trade . . . born to the sea, bred to follow the shoals of any one of the twenty-two species which traversed the Jordan River Valley, dependent on it for his very life and livelihood.

The verb here in Greek (hupago), a few scholars say, from one fleeting angle at least, its tense (future, compound verb) and interior sentence structure, it could mean that Peter meant more than a momentary respite from the perplexities of the day. He probably meant to say: "O.K., guys. It's over. Nice move . . . three good years; but gone, kaput! finito"" Once a fisherman, always a fisherman. Dumb, down on himself. "I'm going back to my former life, fast-bound and fully determined never to allow my dreams to run away with me again. So be it. Nice try . . . but now I'm going to fishing." So, he went. The world does not reward you for great adventures, unless they succeed. The ones who worship risk-taking are always the ones who win.

Then, the six of them, understanding, said: "We'll go, too." (Nathaniel wasn't even a fisherman, by the way, but he went along.) Out on the sea they sailed. All night long, the pity was, they caught nothing. . . . Then, just about dawn, as day was breaking, through the morning sea mists, they saw a man on the shore (It was Jesus, remember . . . but they did not know that it was Jesus). The man called out to them, using what appears to be an Aramaic idiom: "Paidia, may ti prosphagion exete?" Idiomatic and colloquial, like we might say, "How's it going?" or "Didya catch anything yet?" The Revised Standard Version translates: "Children, have you any fish?" The New English Bible says: "Friends, have you caught anything?" My own translation says: "Hey lads, have you had any luck?" They said, "No!" He said, "Cast your net on the other side of the boat, shoot the net to starboard, and you will find some fish."

That always puzzled me. I never could figure out how a Nazarean carpenter would know more about how to fish the Galilean Sea than four Galilean fishermen. I mean Jesus was God Incarnate, but still... Then I read Professor Barclay who wrote that H.V. Morton said that it is not uncommon on the Galilee to this very day, because of the way the morning light strikes the water, for someone to stand on the shore and direct those out on the water. He could see what they were missing. That takes a little of the miracle out of it, but it also eliminates the occupational, or rather the jurisdictional dispute.

Either way, it says, they followed his advice, and when the net was cast over the right-hand side of the boat, one hundred and fifty three good-sized fish were trapped in the net. That made it so heavy, they were almost unable to haul it in, and they were surely afraid that it would break the net. One hundred fifty-three fish were a lot of fish.

Well, it was just about then, while they were counting the fish, I guess, or just plain reveling in their good fortune and deciding it was about time they caught a break . . . "Awright!" . . . it was just about then that John, the beloved disciple, maybe being less inclined to worry over material little things like how many good-sized fish a good-sized fishnet could hold and not break (Some might whisper that he could afford the nonchalance, he and his brother were near enough the wealthy ones among the Twelve), whatever, it was John who finally recognized the man on the shore: He nudged Peter, and said " Hey Simon, look . . . look . . . hey everybody

look! I think it's the Lord! It's Jesus!" They thought He was in Heaven, and there He was, on the shores of Galilee.

Simon Peter, being a rambunctious man of action, sprang right into the sea. Peter was better at responding to a good idea than creating one. Even the most timid among us should rephrase that in the silence of our aching soul: better to fail in a great cause than to win in a meager one. Better to fail with an idea that will ultimately succeed, than to succeed in one that will ultimately fail. That is Dostoevsky . . . you better believe it.

Call it the Martyr's Song if you like. Call it a death wish. Call it burning the candle at both ends. Call it the Calvary March. Call it anything, but be reverent and envious when you do. Twenty-nine years later Peter would look more foolish and stupid than he ever did that morning - leaping, splashing, flailing through the water, gulping and snorting his way to the shore, where the Lord was waiting. By 62 A.D. he would be hanging upside down on a cross on one of Rome's seven hills, suffocating upside down because he said he was not worthy to be crucified right side up, the way that Jesus was; looking beaten and forsaken . . . until on the shores of some other sea -- more lovely, and more lasting . . . waiting over there on that shore, which we call "The other side" -- well, Jesus Christ was waiting there for him, as He will be there when at last your days and mine are through. The dreamer dies, but not the dream. Risk away your life for Christ and He will reward you and yours forever.

When Peter got out on land, just up on the sand a little, there was a charcoal fire ("charcoal," the Bible really says) with fish cooking on the fire and bread warming alongside of it, right there by the Galilean Sea. Jesus said, "Bring me some fish and have breakfast with me." They did. And for those moments they did not have to live on the memory of His words anymore. . . . There are some great moments in a person's life, right? Savor them, revel in them, rejoice . . . come and get it, while you can.

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Now, I suppose this is as good a time as any to tell you that there is much controversy among

Biblical scholars surrounding this episode in John 21. Hardly anyone who is serious about John believes that John 21 is a part of the original Gospel. For one thing, John 20 says that Peter had already seen the Lord in Jerusalem. Matthew and Luke say he saw them Easter night in Jerusalem. How could they not have expected Him in Galilee? John 21 could be a story of a post-resurrection encounter which was tacked on to John, say in 100 A.D., seventy years after the death of Christ.

The Gospel of John is a complete unit without it, but oh how I would miss it. John ends however, naturally with the supernatural Resurrection, and the appearance to Thomas and the others (no disrespect intended), and an intentional sign off by the Apostle. To say that the story was added does not attack the verity of the Resurrection, nor the details of the breakfast by the Galilean Sea. My own view is that John himself added it later. But, this episode is thought by some to be an allegory, whose purpose probably was to reinstate Peter as the leader of the Apostles, to rescue him from his ignominious disgrace around the other charcoal fire outside the palace of Caiaphas, where the cock crowing at a previous dawn found him betrayed his Lord three times.

Without it, the Gospel ends with Peter disgraced. So, when he later became a prominent leader and the Bishop of Rome, such an ending would have seemed intolerable. John has a happy ending for Peter, where Jesus charges him to go and tend his sheep. That is nice for Peter. Nice for Thomas, nice for the disciples, nice for the doubters, nice for everybody. Remember, I warned you about John.

Well, as always, you can worry, or you can wonder. (Are you listening?) What you make of what you have is up to you. It is your choice. You are the dealer of your attitude. Right? I have mine, you take yours. We all take John's.

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But now, as we head for home, note the lovely touch which John puts on the ending, as he records the conversation around the fire that morning. No one dared to ask who Jesus was, he

writes, or where He had been, or what it was like when He was dead. . . . Many times I have wished that they had asked Him that: "Where were you, Lord, when you were not appearing to the disciples. . . ?"

Mainly it is a conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter, Christ asking if Peter really loved Him. Peter says, "Yes," three times (To match the earlier denials, I guess). Christ charged him to tend His sheep, to feed His lambs, to tend His sheep again, that is, to carry on His work of ministering to the sick and dying and the aged, the homeless, widows, orphans, in Galilee then or now, in all Judea then or now, and in all the world beyond.

Oh, the world is a lonely place . . . in the city streets with the hungry and the unemployed then or now, in Nazareth and Jerusalem then; in Charlotte and Miami now; and what do you do when you are lonely and you do not know what to do? Or afraid, or worried. Where should you turn when there is no where else to turn? It's up to you, but I have a final suggestion.

Why not sit down to a quiet little breakfast for a chit-chat with our Risen Lord along the Galilean shore, a week or so after Easter. He invites you to breakfast. And after he has walked around the charcoal fire then (on around our Sanctuary now), serving them/us one by one. After forgiving us for all that we have said and done and failed to do, he will say: "O.K., friends, that's all over now. So be up and at them once again. If you love me, show it by what you give of yourself and your time, and your prayers and your energies to serve the least of these my brethren. For when you do that, you have done it unto me.

Don't prance around and boast, far less to rest and revel in my resurrected glory. . . . Its purpose was not to impress you, it was to inspire you. Get up and go out and work like fools for my sake. Whatever else you do not know, you know that you can live on love . . . love received, love shared, and my Resurrected love." If the world has disappointed you, not to worry, be happy, claim your rightful joy. And do not mope or whine or whimper, at least not until they do to you all they did to me.

Praise God and Halleluiah, they did it. They did it. And, you and I can do it, too, any morning at

all. Breakfast is always ready and waiting. And if you slave away all night long without success, through one night or all the nights since he's been gone, or since tragedy came by last month, or since you lost your job, or your hope, or your son, or your school, or your health. Keep at it....

For one morning, you will not even know who it is at first, but from the shore of Galilee you will hear the question: "Paidia may ti prosphagion exete?" -- Hey friends, are you having any luck? And when you hear it, oh gosh, quit complaining and be honest about your need, and do what he tells you. Call back, "No Lord. I am managing alright, but I need your help, O Lord. I cannot make it by myself. Tell me what I need to do, then help me to get it done."

Then, spring right into the water and leap and thrash yourself to shore -- be a fool for Christ's sake . . . and . . . when you finally arrive, the Lord will be there waiting; the fire will still be warm, and breakfast will be ready; and He will serve you. Did you hear that? He will serve you. So you and I can go out and serve others.

And the ultimate joy of you can borrow is that from that day on they lived happily ever after. No matter what happened, no matter what surprises and disappointments, even another cross and agonizing death, from that morning on, with just the memory of his words, they lived happily ever after. And so shall you and I, if we surrender ourselves to him and tend his sheep and feed his lambs....For now and evermore. Amen.