

153 FISH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

April 18, 2010

Scripture: Psalm 30; John 21:1-19

There are two stories of miraculous catches of fish in the gospels. The first is in Luke's gospel and it appears at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

But unlike Luke's story John's account comes not at the beginning of Jesus' ministry but rather at the end, as a post resurrection appearance. The disciples have been out all night and have caught nothing. But the risen Lord calls out to Peter from the beach, and tells him to throw out the net on the right side of the boat. The catch is so great that it strains the net but does not tear it.

Peter realizing that it is the Lord who has spoken to him, throws on some clothes and swims to the beach followed by the other disciples who bring the boat ashore. There they have breakfast, a fish fry, if you will, during which the risen Jesus eats fish and breaks bread with the disciples.

On the one hand, it's a story probably heard by John's church as a sign that when they gathered at the Lord's table he was present with them. It was also an encouragement that great numbers would be added in time as they fished for others and welcomed a growing and diverse community into their midst, Jews and Gentiles together. And last but not least, it is probably a story remembered to counter the Gnostic idea that Jesus' risen form was not substantial, that he was some kind of phantom, incapable of eating or speaking. A resurrection appearance in which Jesus eats and speaks and knows the good fishing holes pretty much puts the Gnostics on notice.

But there are some strange questions raised by this story. Maybe you noticed. The first question would be, why have they gone fishing, considering they have already been privy to some rather astounding resurrection appearances. After all shouldn't they be packing their bags, getting ready to go on the road with their first evangelistic crusade? Thomas has even had an opportunity in the story just preceding to touch the wounds in the hands and side of the risen Lord. So why go fishing?

And why would Peter put clothes *on* in order to swim to Jesus rather than throw some off to avoid getting them wet? Modesty? Symbolism? Beats me!

Strangest detail of all is the numbering of the miraculous draught of fish. John says, "Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty three of them, and though there were so many the net was not torn."¹

How is it that we know that?

Did they actually count the fish? Did they really stop and count 153 fish flopping around in those nets?

Novelist David James Duncan in his book *The River Why* puts on the lips of his character Gus Orviston this description of what it might have been like that day by the Sea of Galilee.

...upon hauling the net to shore, the disciples squatted down by that immense, writhing fish pile and started tossing them into a second pile, painstakingly counting, ‘one, two, three, four, five, six, seven...’ all the way up to a hundred and fifty-three while the newly risen Lord of Creation, the Sustainer of all their beings, He who died for them and for whom they would gladly die, stood waiting, ignored, till the heap of fish was quantified.”²

You can’t begin to imagine how much Biblical scholarship has been focused on the question of the meaning of the 153 fish. Or maybe you can. The precision of the number is just too good to leave alone. Such venerable doctors of the church as Augustine and John Chrysostom in the 5th Century, preached and wrote about this number.

But I’m going to venture the guess (and this is not risking much) that John never really wanted us to worry that much about 153 fish. Sometimes something is there that is hidden in plain sight, and you look at it and become fixed on it and it distracts you from the larger matter at hand. 153 fish is that kind of detail.

It’s just a large number of fish. A big haul. Maybe enough people to start a church, and by the first century’s standards a big church. Maybe it was John’s church of 153 members. I don’t know. Your guess really is as good as mine.

What concerns me is the concern for 153 fish. John seems so intent on remembering every detail of the story as if any lost piece might be a missed opportunity to present convincing evidence.

The problem is we can’t prove the resurrection. We cannot fine comb every aspect of the stories for empirical evidence, or spray luminol in the tomb for traces of blood, or subject Jesus’ graveclothes to carbon dating, or look for seismic markings in the layers of geological sediment to document the earthquake associated with the resurrection. We’re empirical, we want details, observable facts, something to touch, or taste, or smell, or analyze, like 153 fish skeletons shrouded in some roping threads that once were a net. But we don’t get that. What we get instead is a story of a risen Lord encountered by faithful disciples who broke bread and ate fish with him by the seashore.

John Shelby Spong, the retired bishop of Newark says, of course, that that’s not what happened at all. Jesus never really ate anything with his disciples after his death. He drains out all of the life of the story by describing for us what “really happened.”

One night in the early fall [Spong suggests], Simon and his mates had a particularly good catch. They were happy as they dragged the fish ashore. They built a fire, placed some of their catch on the grill, brought out the bread from the boat, and prepared the feast. As was his custom,

Simon took bread, said the ceremonial blessing, broke and distributed it. In his blessing, he likened the bread to Jesus' broken body. Both, he said, were meant to give life.

Then it happened. A light went on in Simon's head. It was as if the heavens opened and so did Simon's eyes, and Simon stared into the realm of God. There he saw Jesus as part of God's being and God's meaning. It was not delusional. Death could not destroy the one who made God known. "Death cannot contain him I have seen the Lord!" was Simon's ecstatic exclamation. Then Simon opened the eyes of the others to what he saw. Each of them grasped this vision, experienced Jesus alive, and were themselves resurrected. That was Easter.³

Essentially, what Spong has said is that Easter is the imaginative creation of Peter's ecstatic vision. In other words, the resurrection is all in Peter's head. This, of course, conveniently ignores the details of the story so carefully described by John, that Jesus eats and speaks and points to where the fishing is good, precisely the details that John wanted to note in the story to counteract the idea that the risen Christ was some figment of the imagination.

Yesterday at the Metropolitan Museum a group of us stood before Albert Bierstadt's painting of The Rocky Mountains at Lander's Peak. It's a glorious, huge painting, ceiling to floor of the expansive Rockies, with Native Americans camping around the near side and your eye drawn across a lake and to the high peaks behind it in the distance. We were told by our guide that the painting was a composite of many sketches, painstakingly drawn, some in pencil, some in oil and then placed together in one scene. Did it ever happen? Were the mountains there? Did the Native Americans camped on the near shore ever stand there, play there, eat there, fish there? Yes, no, yes. But how do you convey it? How do you find words for the ineffable? That is John the gospeller's challenge.

You will ask me to explain the resurrection to you now that we are a couple of weeks out and the visitors are gone, and there's nobody left but us folks, us insiders and cognoscenti who can bear the real truth. You want me to pull out the surveillance tapes from the tomb, play back the 9-1-1 call from the women in the garden, get you some incontrovertible evidence to prove the resurrection was something more than the wishful thinking of Jesus' zealous disciples. We think we have to prove Spong wrong and defend God's honor.

But we don't. And truth be known, we can't. As Tennyson said so succinctly, "Nothing worth proving can be proved, nor yet disproven."⁴ So it is with the resurrection. For faith in the resurrection is more than imagination, and something other than the product of empirical evidence incontrovertibly explained.

The real question at the heart of Easter's affirmation, and our resurrection faith is not "How is this possible?" But rather, how good is our God? For if God is as good and

as loving as the One whom we know as the God of all creation, who formed the earth and hurled it into space, and set the world in motion and fixed the laws of the universe, and made the sun to warm the earth by day and the dark to cool it by night; if this God is that good, then what is a miraculous catch of 153 fish, or the bursting forth of life from that place where death once reigned?

The truth to which the resurrection points affirms the overarching power of God's love in a world where loveless power would threaten to overwhelm us all. Like the sun rising in the morning sky, the eyes of the mind are not equipped to look directly at the fiery center but rather to the sides all about, and to the things near at hand that are illumined by the sun's radiance.

Sometimes I think we miss the signs of a world alive with resurrection life because they are hidden in plain sight.

I have been listening to the stories of some of our members who have come back from recent mission trips to Peru and Haiti where people have so little in the way of worldly possessions. The thing that always seems so surprising to our people is how positive those who have so little are, how happy to be alive even in the midst of what is to us such abject poverty. Now I do not in any way wish to moralize the value of poverty as a spiritual virtue.

But recently when the earthquake shook Haiti, and American news reporters were describing the scene in Port au Prince, they could not get over the fact that even the night after the great quake, with aftershocks coming several times an hour, there still were children playing in the streets, and fervent singing to God pouring out from people's hearts, and hope pushing through the tears. Even Anderson Cooper could not believe what he was hearing. Sometimes we miss the power of the resurrection because it's hidden in plain sight.

Fridays when I'm writing in the study in the South Wing, there's a group of seniors that gather in the Great Hall. They file in here for the Caring Community luncheon and some of them arrive a couple of hours early to rehearse and sing music. They're on walkers some of them, average age is about seventy five I suppose, maybe eighty. Some of them come with their aides assisting them in wheelchairs, most of them are living on a shoestring and don't have much. They don't always look so good when they're arriving, but they clearly enjoy the singing. And whatever they lack in musical ability they more than make up in volume.

So every Friday when they leave the doors open to the Great Hall and sing their warm ups and start in on some of their show tunes, I have to go to out into the hall and close the doors to the balcony and the Great Hall because they are loud.

This past Friday they were really rocking and rolling for a group of septa- and octogenarians. I had to go down and close the doors because I couldn't think. Too much noise. As I peeked inside to see and hear what they were doing, I realized what a great time they were having. They were up and moving and having a ball.

What were they singing? It was a Cole Porter song from 1934. “Anything Goes!” I looked in there, and these folks were on their feet standing, moving with the music, throwing those rebuilt hips into the action, “Anything Goes.” Does anyone want to tell them that the world is not alive with the power of God to bring life where it is least expected? Sometimes we miss the power of the resurrection because it’s hidden in plain sight.

I’ve mentioned Beth Waldemath and David Lewicki several times over the past few months. They are the parents of two children, James who is about three and their newborn daughter, Margaret, who is in the NICU at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. She is now about fifteen weeks old and weighs 5 pounds 10 ounces. Breathing is Margaret’s biggest challenge. Her lungs are not developed and her heart is stressed, and she is struggling for air much of the time.

Beth writes,

When I come, she falls asleep in my arms and if I’m not worried about time, my eyelids grow heavy too. Then the nurse reminds me I am not the mother of a newborn at home who can fall asleep rocking her healthy child, there are wires and careful positioning to consider. But still I find peace when she is sleeping soundly in my arms.

Friday as Beth wrote her blog it was not one of those peaceful days. Margaret was struggling to breathe and it was hard to calm or soothe her.

We have started the long process of applying for disability and Medicare Care at Home for her should she ever be able to return home [Beth writes]. There are so many different parts to work out. In our lives we fret about all the different possible paths and what step has to happen before we get to the next one. If A then B, If B then C, etc. For Margaret, there is just one step, there has always been one step. *Take the next breath. Take the next breath.*

I am not sure what lies ahead for Beth and David and James and Margaret, but I do know that the one thing that they all count on is the confidence that in every step and every breath of their journey, God is with them, beyond the hospital and the uncertainties of the A’s and B’s of the next steps, in life and in death, God is with them. And that is a confidence born of something better than evidence and greater than wishful thinking, it is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. It is staking one’s life and one’s future on God.

Maybe Barbara Brown Taylor has captured it best when she writes,

I am not trying to convince anyone. How could I? [Our faith] cannot be supported by reason any more than it can be supported by experience. All we have are the stories, based on the unreasonable experience of people we never knew – and the choice of whether to

believe them or not. If we believe them and they turn out to be wrong, then what? We will be duped, stupid, gullible, *dead*. If, on the other hand, we do not believe them and we turn out to be wrong – well, what a celebration and vindication of life, however incomprehensible it turns out to be.

Any way you look at it, the choice is basically this: what would you rather be wrong about? Death? or life?⁵

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2010.

¹ John 21:11

² *The River Why*

³ John Shelby Spong, “The Easter Moment: Drawing Conclusions,”
www.beliefnet.com/story_76/story_7622_2.html

⁴ *The Ancient Sage*.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999. 207.