

John 21
April 19, 2020
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Following the resurrection, the Gospel of John describes three different occasions when Jesus appeared to different groups of his disciples. 1st, in Jerusalem he appeared to his disciples without Thomas present. 2nd, again in Jerusalem he appeared to all the disciples including Thomas. 3rd, in Galilee Jesus appeared at sunrise while 7 of his disciples were fishing. It seems so very strange that with the news of the resurrection still ringing in their ears, the disciples went back to their lives as Galilean fishermen. But, isn't that like us, living our own lives as if the resurrection had never occurred?

1) John 21:1-14 The Miracle of the Fish

- a) The miracle story is introduced in verse 1 with the words, "he showed himself." These words occurred previously in John's Gospel on 4 occasions and every time they describe a revelation event, emphasizing that the story is meant to reveal something about Jesus. This story has all of the components of the other miracle stories in John's Gospel: 1) verses 1-3 describe *a situation of need*; 2) verses 4-6 describe *the miracle itself*; verses 7-14 affirm that a miracle has taken place and describe *the response of people* to the miracle.
- b) There are clear parallels between this story and the fishing miracle told in Luke 5:1-11. Alan Culpepper concludes that this story was widely known outside of the Johannine community and originally circulated independent of the other post resurrection appearances
- c) Verse 2 tells of seven disciples. Nathaniel reappears for the first time since chapter 1 reminding the reader that Nathaniel was promised in 1:50 that he would see "greater things than these." Now those words are being fulfilled and the early Christian community is encouraged to expect "greater things" as well.
- d) Verse 3 establishes the context for the miracle. Peter announces that he is going fishing and the other disciples join with him. Culpepper comments, "Peter's announcement that he is going fishing may be either an invitation to the others to join him for a night of fishing, or it may be a declaration that he is returning to his old occupation." Although they fish all night, they catch nothing, establishing the need for a miracle. It is interesting after meeting Jesus we have no biblical story where Simon can catch any fish without the help of Jesus.

- e) In his gospel John places a great deal of emphasis on the contrast of light and darkness, so it is important that verse 4 describes Jesus appearing at daybreak. Just like Mary at the tomb on resurrection morning, the disciples do not recognize Jesus, but clearly the reader knows who that figure is on the shore.
- f) In verse 5 Jesus addresses the disciples as “children” an important term in view of John’s theme of believers as the children of God. Some commentators point to the humor of the situation as Jesus calls out to the disciples in an empty boat, riding high in the water, and undoubtedly with the men loudly complaining: “Hey guys did you catch anything?”
- g) In verse 6 Jesus instructs the disciples to let their nets down one more time on the right side of the boat. Nothing else had worked that night, so why not try what the stranger on the shore is suggesting. When they do, the net is so full they can’t haul it into the boat. In both verse 8 and 11 the abundance of the catch is reiterated. Remember the previous miracles that spoke of great abundance – changing the water into wine and feeding of the 5000. The number “153” in verse 11 has intrigued interpreters. Some pointed out that it is the sum of numbers 1-17 meaning to show a large number of magical quantity. Others suggested that the Greeks recognized a total of 153 different species of fish, meaning that all the world’s fish are included. Most others simply conclude it refers to a large number of fish, an abundant provision.
- h) In verses 7-8 the disciple whom Jesus loved, usually identified as John, is the first to recognize Jesus. When he speaks to Peter his words echo the declaration on Easter morning, “It is the Lord!” Peter’s response seems a bit confused as he puts on his clothes then jumps into the water and races to the shore. The other disciples came in the boat dragging their large net of fish.
- i) In verses 9-14 the emphasis points to the ability of Jesus, not only to provide for his disciples, but to provide for them in abundance. Before the boat arrives with the disciples and their great catch of fish, Jesus has already prepared a meal of fish and bread. Like previous miracles there is an emphasis here on the abundant provision as Peter is pictured hauling the net ashore filled with a great number of large fish. The word “haul” or “draw in” used in verse 11 is exactly the same word used in chapter 6 (“no one can come to me unless drawn by the father”) and in chapter 12 (“and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”) The point John is making is that the work of Jesus will now become the disciples’ work.

2) John 21:15-25 The Restoration or Rehabilitation of Peter

- a) Dialogue rather than action is the focus of this scene and it concerns the future role of Simon Peter. This scene demonstrates the restoration of Peter following his betrayal of Jesus in the courtyard. Jesus asked Peter three times if he loves him, three times Peter affirms his love for Jesus, and three times Jesus commissions Peter to feed his sheep.
- b) Jesus asked Peter if he loves him “more than these.” Many commentators see this as a question whether Peter’s love is greater than the other disciples. But that is not the style of Jesus to engender rivalry among his followers. Look what has happened: the resurrection has occurred and Peter has gone back to fishing. Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than he loves the boats, the nets, and the fish.
- c) Quite often interpreters of this passage focus on the different words for love used in verses 15-17. In the first two questions Jesus uses one Greek word for love, “agape” and Peter answers using another Greek word for love, “philia.” The third time Jesus changes the verb and uses Peter’s word for love. The fact is, John uses these different words for love interchangeably throughout his gospel. This is not a lesson on the grammar of love. It is instead the most crucial question for all of us: what is at the center of your life? What are you leaning on in life? Simon, are you wholly committed to the cause of Christ?
- d) I think this scene of the last meeting between Simon Peter and Jesus can be best understood in light of the first meeting between Jesus and Simon. When they first meet, Simon Peter is known as Simeon bar Jona. “Jona” means dove or small bird, but in John 1:42 Jesus gives him a new name, Peter or Petros, meaning rock. Clarence Jordan’s Cotton Patch translation refers to Peter as Rocky. What does it take to change a small fluttering bird into a solid rock of faith? Sometimes Peter stands as that solid rock as he proclaims, “Thou art the Christ the son of the living God.” But sometimes Peter appears like that little dove as he cowers in fear saying he doesn’t know anyone named Jesus.
- e) Just as Simon denied him three times, so Jesus now asked him three times.
 - i) Question number one: do you love me more than these? “These” refers to the fishing boats, the business, and the everyday life that Peter was so used to. Simon, what is the center of your life? When Jesus confronts us he does not require that you have certain skills or that you understand certain things. He simply asks, is love for God at the very center of your life?
 - ii) Question number two: this time without comparison; the emphasis is upon the sincerity of your love. Do you really love me? Peter responds, Lord, you know that I

love you; you can see that I love you. And Jesus replies, then serve me. The criterion of love is service. If you love me, feed my sheep

- iii) Question number three: he denied him three times now he asked him three times – do you love me, do you really love me? How many times does Jesus come asking? He keeps pursuing us, like the hound of heaven. We cannot outrun his love. So he comes asking each one of us, do you love me? The ancient legend of Quo Vadis tells the story of Peter choosing to flee from the city of Rome because the Emperor Nero has decreed a harsh persecution of all Christians. As he is running away Peter encounters Jesus going into the city. Jesus asked Peter “quo vadis?” meaning, where are you going?” Peter responded by saying I’m leaving the city because if I stayed I would surely die. Then Peter asked Jesus, “quo vadis?” Jesus replied by saying, “Peter, I’m going into the city to die in your place once again.” The legend said that Peter turned around toward Rome with such conviction and purpose, that it left a deep impression in the pavement that remains until this day. That may be just a legend, but in fact, it is the gospel truth that Jesus is with us even in the harshest moments of life, whether it’s persecution in Rome or a pandemic in Richmond.

- f) Conclusion: how do you grow from a fluttering bird to a solid rock of faith? The answer can be found in verse 18. You grow in faith by learning to lean. In Gary Wills’ book Certain Trumpets, he interviewed Pope John XXIII and asked him, what is the basis of your authority, where does your authority come from? The good Pope answered by quoting John 21:18, “My authority comes from leaning on Jesus.” Certainly, in this time of pandemic we all have reached our physical and spiritual limitations. We have learned the truth that there are situations we cannot face alone depending only upon our own strength. We have come to understand the importance of leaning upon the Lord. We have also understood how heavily as a nation we lean on the work of doctors, nurses, 1st responders and others. There is an important spiritual truth here. None of us is independent; in a time of plague we all need to learn to lean.

- g) The Future Role Of the Disciples Peter and John
 - i) By the time John 21 was written, Peter had died a martyr’s death during Nero’s persecution in the 60s. Writing in the year 96 Clement makes a reference to the death of Peter following much suffering. Later Tertullian speaks of Peter’s death as being bound to a cross with a belt. And Eusebius quotes Clement as saying Peter was crucified in Rome up-side down, by his own request. By the time of his death Peter had been fully rehabilitated.

- ii) The beloved disciple would not face a martyr's death but would live a long life. There were rumors in the early church that the beloved disciple would not die until Jesus came again. But the writer of these closing verses explains clearly that Jesus had not said the beloved disciple would not die. This widespread tradition needed correction because by the time of this writing the beloved disciple had either died or was very near death.

- h) In verses 24-25 the beloved disciple is identified as the author of the original edition of this gospel and the one whose personal testimony is preserved in these pages. He also certifies that the larger Johannine community, "we", knows that this witness is true. The gospel of John is offered as an eyewitness account of one who was with Jesus at each of the crucial moments of his ministry and as one for whom Jesus had a special love.