

THE RESURRECTED CHURCH

John 21:1-12

April 18, 2010

Have you noticed that television dramas many times begin each show by saying, "Previously on *Greys Anatomy* or *24*...?"

This morning, I want to begin by saying "Previously in the gospel of John, from Micah's wonderful sermon last week, we discovered that the disciples were very confused on the evening of the first Easter. They were still trying to make sense out of what had happened. They were meeting behind locked doors. They were afraid. They talked in muffled tones. What had happened to Jesus could very well happen to them. Every time they heard a noise they thought that someone was coming to haul them away to prison.

And not only that, they were greatly disturbed that the body of their friend Jesus had disappeared out of the tomb in which they had laid it right before the Sabbath. Where could he have gone? Who could have taken him?

And not only that, they were troubled by Mary's crazy story of running into the ghost of Jesus in the garden. Didn't they have enough to worry about without Mary trying to scare them even sillier?!

This once tight team who had not long ago been walking on top of the world as they entered into Jerusalem with Jesus was now trying to disappear into the deepest, darkest hole they could find. They were a muddled mess.

In last week's sermon, Micah reminded us about how the risen Christ encounters the disciples in their hiding places, and how they struggled to cross over the bridge from unbelief to belief, from doubt to faith.

We hear from this part of the Jesus story that it seems to be easier to resurrect the body of human being than it is to resurrect the hopes of those drowning in despair. In the disciple's minds, the Jesus movement was as dead as Jesus and they didn't know where to turn next.

But as we all know after times of crisis, life goes on, and so must they. In this morning's scripture we hear that Peter was the first disciple to stick his head out into the open air again, albeit in the dark of night.

With Jesus dead and the movement in which they had all been a part in shambles, Peter decides to return to the life he led before he had met Jesus. He tries to turn the clock back, to return to the comfortable, known past. He decides to get back in the boat—and fish. And he invites several of the other disciples to go with him.

But can we ever go back to the way it used to be? Can we ever return to what was and find it exactly the way we left it?

Peter certainly found that was not so. They fished hard from dusk until dawn, and caught nada, nil, nothing, zip, zilch.

Can't you imagine in the deepest part of the night, on a boat bound for nowhere and nets empty as a tomb, how Peter and the other disciples must have felt?!

Their dreams had been nailed to the cross with Christ.

Their futures were in jeopardy because of Jesus.

Their hopes had died as certainly as had their teacher, and they couldn't even catch one little rainbow trout to feed themselves.

Can you hear the sound of Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James and John and the two nameless disciples' spirits hitting bottom? Splat!

Then, as the dawn began to crack open over the horizon, they heard a voice call out to them from the shore, inquiring about their luck. When the man heard their negative response, he encouraged them to try fishing on the other side of the boat—on the right side of the boat.

John Killinger, one time preaching professor at Vanderbilt Divinity school, wasn't quite sure why Jesus specified one particular side of the boat over the other, but he does remind contemporary hearers that the left side of the brain

is “the calculating, orderly side, the side that analyzes, does figures, gives names to things. Jesus had dealt with a lot of left-brained people in the Gospel. They were the legalists, the ones who thought the world was constructed by an accountant and everything could be got down in black and white.

Maybe Jesus, when he told them to fish on the right side of the boat, was asking them to tap into their creative, artistic side. Maybe Jesus was asking them dream, to open their minds to a different way. (John Killinger "Learning to Fish In a New Place" Program #3605 First broadcast November 1, 1992 *Chicago Sunday Evening Club* and *30 Good Minutes*.)

Whatever the case—it worked. Our gospel story today said that when the disciples changed their routine, when they tried something new, they caught more fish than they were able to handle by themselves.

In this third and last appearance by Jesus to the disciples after his resurrection, Jesus taught them one last lesson—keep open to new ways of living in the world; use the word in fresh new ways as you live your life, and you may be surprised by the abundance that will fill your hearts’ net.

That day, Jesus gives the disciples a glimpse of their future, a vision of hope. And the church is resurrected on a beach over a campfire with fried fish and broken bread.

And Jesus continues to call the church to live as the resurrected body of Christ even today.

Maybe especially today.

For you see, we’re living in a time when disciples of Christ—and I’m not just talking about our small but wonderful denomination, but all those followers of Christ, seem to be in hiding.

Those of us in church leadership have been hearing the death knell of “church as we know it” for many years now. Indeed, sociologists of religion have said that Christendom as it has been for the last 2000 years is already dissembled, and

that the Jesus movement is diminishing in influence at a rapid rate, especially in the northern hemisphere.

George Bullard, one of the nation's leading observers of congregational life recently wrote, "Many national denominational organizations in North America are dying. For most it's a slow death. The causes and signs of their demise are obvious but few are making wise decisions to morph into 21<sup>st</sup> century denominations. Too many are choosing to recommit to old patterns or suicidal patterns of denominational life. Their pain is insufficient to motivate them to take action. They may be in denial. Their desire to thrive and reach their full kingdom potential lacks the passion necessary to motivate them toward transformational actions. They may be depressed." (Bullard, George. "The Coming Death of National Denominations," April 14, 2010. The Columbia Partnership.)

In other words, we who make up the church have been hiding behind closed church doors, frightened about the death of what used to be and unsure what to do about the future—wondering if there will be a future for us.

And so many of us, when we do try to step out, go back to the way we've always done things. Like Peter, we try to return to what we've done in the past, but we find out it just doesn't work anymore.

But here's the good news that also rings it's clarion message: Jesus continues to call to us over the expansive ocean of time and space. He's telling us it's time to leave our hiding places and to go out and fish again. However, he's calling us to drop our nets in a new place, in a new way. And our little group of disciples here at East Dallas Christian Church have opened our hearts and minds to what it means to fish on the right side of the boat, to be creative, to try new things, to be open to a fresh spirit of Christ blowing throughout this building.

We've felt that fresh breeze blowing with the addition of a new way of worshipping God through the Table worship experience. We've felt that fresh breeze blowing as we've stepped outside our building and began to build relationships with our neighbors at the Deep Ellum arts festival and the block party at Exall park.

Two Sundays ago, we saw this sanctuary filled for Easter, and many commented that it looked like the Old East Dallas Christian Church. But when we look at the faces of those who were baptized that morning, and those who joined our church that day, we see that Christ is bringing a whole host of new faces to us—faces that represent to fullness of the kingdom of God in all its rich color and loving life-styles.

And today, after church, we will hear about how our Masterplan committee has been working for a vision of the future of our church, seeing our beloved and sacred church home with fresh eyes.

We are living in an exciting time in this country—a time when many in our neighborhoods have not yet heard about the Jesus we know—the Jesus who offers direction for the lost, healing for the diseased, hope for the disheartened.

We get the opportunity to be missionaries without ever having to leave our hometown. We just have to go to our grocery store, or walk our neighborhood streets, and visit with our colleagues and classmates, and share with them how much Jesus has done for us.

It's a great thing to be able to give to others that Good News we've found. It's a treasure that is ours to share, and it's worth every effort we have to give it.

Because you see, Christ is resurrected in us and through us. It is only because of us that the Body of Christ continues to live and have it's being in the world. And Christ is calling us anew to rise up and live again for him.

In 2003, when I was still serving my former congregation in Tucson, a couple joined, transferring their membership from their Disciples congregation in New Orleans. They had been long-time active members of the Westside Christian Church and had lot of stories about the glory days of their church, which always had a float in the Mardi Gras parade each year.

But the Terry's also came grieving a bit, knowing that they were one of the few "young folks" –in their 50's—left in the church to do the work. Church attendance had dwindled down to about 40-50 on Sunday morning on a good

day, and the building had huge repair needs, with very little financial wherewithal to handle them.

And then, with what sounded like their death knell, Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. Many of the members fled the city, and few came back. The pastor was not able to reach the church for over week to assess damage, and when he finally made it back, saw that though the structure still stood, water had damaged most of the interior furnishing of the struggling congregation. Soggy Chalice Hymnals floated in stagnant pools on the floor. The pews were water logged and warped.

However, the communion table still stood on the chancel, cross in place, ready to serve even in this catastrophe.

The Terry's cried as they told me that this was certainly the end of their beloved church. And so, the Great River Region also prepared to give the congregation a proper burial.

But then Johnny Wray and the Week of Compassion got involved. They needed a centralized place to bring materials for the relief that we offer with our partners through Church World Service. Then they needed a place to gather the many mission groups who were clamoring to come help from all over the country.

The few members of Westside Christian Church found themselves becoming hosts to their extended church family members. And the neighbors around the church began to join in with those who came to the center to help rebuild their city.

All of a sudden, worship attendance on Sunday mornings began to rise. People were coming, drawn to the fact that here was a church that was doing something visible in the name of Jesus.

From across the water, from behind a hurricane, Jesus called to them to fish in a different way, a new way, and the church has been resurrected.

And each week, they gather around that communion table that made it through the storm,

just as we gather around this communion table that has seen us through 107 years of life,

Just as the disciples gathered around a communion table on a beach where the smell of fried fish and broken bread was offered to them

And none of us dares to ask the one who serves us each and every week "Who are you?" Because we know it is the Lord, our Lord, Jesus the Christ.  
Amen