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FISH, FISH, FISH

John 21:1-14; Easter 3C-Jr. Confirmation; May 4-5, 2019

Alleluia, Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed, Alleluia!**

On the Second and Third Sundays of Easter we heard in our Gospel Readings from John about how Jesus revealed Himself alive three times to His disciples after He rose from the dead. First, to ten, the eleven minus Thomas, then to all of them, including Thomas, and today to six disciples: Simon Peter, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee James and John, and two others not identified.

The significance of John saying that this was the third time Jesus revealed Himself alive to His disciples probably has something to do with the Old Testament regulation that a testimony of something had to be established by at least two, or three witnesses that agreed. In other words, this was the third time Jesus showed Himself alive after His death and burial so there could be no doubt of His resurrection. Jesus really did rise from the dead. But how does this account of the disciples going fishing fit in with Jesus' resurrection? What are we supposed to learn about Jesus and our life in the Church now that Christ has risen from the dead?

When the Gospels record a miracle of Jesus it means much more than just proof that, yes, Jesus can do miracles because He is God's Son. For example, the account in John six of Jesus feeding the 5,000 is 15 verses long, but discussion of what it means goes until the end of the chapter, 71 verses. In our Gospel today, which takes place after Jesus rose from the dead, what should we learn about this miraculous catch of fish?

When I started studying the text, which involved translating it from the original Greek into English, something that I noticed right away was that John used three different words for "fish" depending on which fish he was describing. The first word for fish was when Jesus called from the shore asking the disciples if they had caught any to eat. The second word was the 153 large fish the disciples caught at Jesus' command. The third word for fish was the fish Jesus prepared with the bread on the shore, which He fed the disciples for breakfast. In English they are all called "fish," but they are different words.

What is unique about each of the different words used for fish? What is John's point by using different words?

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered Him, "No."

The first word John uses for "fish" (πρσφάγιον) is actually a general term for some food or relish that was normally put on bread to eat. This is the only time it is used in the entire Bible. In this context, it clearly means "fish" since Jesus was asking if the fishermen had caught any fish to give Him to eat.

It is significant that the disciples had caught none of this kind fish, especially as compared to the many fish they would catch at Jesus word. They had decided on their own, at Peter's suggestion, to go fishing that night. On their own, they caught nothing and had nothing to give Jesus when He appeared. The disciples that day decided to do something they used to do before Jesus called them to leave their boats, follow Him, and become "fishers of men" as His apostles.

This failure to succeed parallels our lives when lived without the Word and command of Jesus Christ. If we set goals in life that do not take into account the Lord who died and lives for us, those goals will come to nothing in the end. A trap we as Christians can be caught in is to separate our faith in Jesus from our daily lives.

Being a Christian is not just coming to church once in a while to worship, but something we are every minute of our lives. Most of us aren't pastors and teachers in the church, but all of us live out our faith in the risen Lord Jesus in the various vocations we have been given. You remember the Catechism: "Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker?" On this day, when we confirm another group of our young men and women, we have to remember that their learning and growing in the faith is not done, but just getting started. They are going to be Christians in high school and college, at work, in their relationships and marriages, as fathers and mothers. If they choose to do that apart from Christ and His Word, the result will be a very empty life in the end.

The second word for “fish” (ἰχθύς) John uses is the common word for any number of fish that swim in lakes, streams, and oceans. **[Jesus] said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish.** When they were finally hauled ashore, they counted 153 large fish.

When we hear these words in the context of the Easter resurrection of Jesus and our life in the Church, we are reminded of the time Jesus called four fishermen from catching fish to catching people, who would become Christians. **“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men”** (Mt 4:19). These fish caught in the net by some of those same disciples of Jesus are like people who are caught in the nets of God’s Word and sacraments and drawn into the Church by faith in Jesus. The only way that we become Christians is to come to faith by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word of Christ. “I believe that by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel.” Any word other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ is worthless for faith. Peter, the fisherman, said, **“I’m going fishing,”** and caught nothing. But the Word of Jesus, **“Cast the net on the right side of the boat,”** created the great catch.

This reminds us of the mission of the Church to reach out to those not in the Church to bring them in. Our words cannot accomplish that, but speaking the Word of Jesus Christ, God the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies” Christians. On Confirmation, we give thanks that these children were “hauled into” the Church by the “net” of Baptism and God’s Word and kept in the one true faith. Sometimes this net catches a lot of fish, other times just a few, or a single fish. But we trust the promise that God’s Word **shall not return to [Him] empty, but it shall accomplish that which [He] purposes, and shall succeed in the thing for which [He] sent it** (Is. 55:11).

There is yet a third word for “fish” (ὄψαριον) in this passage of John 21. **When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread... Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” ... Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.**

If the combination of “bread and fish” sounds familiar to you from the Feeding of the 5,000 (Jn 6:1-71), you would be correct. John uses the same word for “fish” in both the Feeding of the 5,000 and our account of the miraculous catch of fish today. The word He uses describes a fish filet prepared to be eaten. In both cases Jesus is the one who provided the food of bread and fish and gave it to be eaten.

When we are gathered into the Church, Jesus invites us to come together and be fed by Him. It is not a “shore lunch” of bread and fish that He feeds us, but of His own body and blood with the bread and wine of Holy Communion. And like the disciples on the shore did not have to ask, “**Who are you?**” when they saw Jesus feeding them, **because they knew it was the Lord**, neither we do need to wonder who it is. When Jesus prepares for us the breakfast of His body and blood, we know it is the Lord coming to us and feeding us. “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.”

In our congregation, Confirmation marks the start of receiving the Lord’s Supper. This is in line with our Lutheran Confessions that remind us that Christians should be taught the faith, examined and absolved of their sins before they receive the Sacrament (Augsburg Confessions XXV). But the Lord’s Supper is not a graduation ceremony from something, but the Bread from heaven that we need for as long as we live on this earth.

Dear Christians, Christ is risen from the dead and has prepared a breakfast of His body and blood for us to eat and to drink. Amen.