

“Doing What Comes Naturally”

John 21:1-14

April 18, 2010

3rd Sunday of Easter

How could they do it? These disciples, I mean. What *were* they thinking? They had just witnessed the most important event in all of human history: the resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, from the dead. And here they are, lounging around by the Sea of Galilee. Of course, we don't know exactly how long after the resurrection the events in our text took place, but it was relatively soon after. The text does say that this was the third appearance of Jesus to the disciples. He had appeared to them on Easter evening and eight days later, so this was maybe a week and a half or two weeks after the resurrection.

We really shouldn't be too hard on them. After all, they are only doing what comes naturally. After a huge happening like the resurrection, there was bound to be a let down and they were let down. Peter decides to do what is most natural to him: go fishing. The others decide to join him. But, after a night of trying to do what they think should be done in the way they think it should be done, they have no success at all. They caught nothing.

In the early morning, when dawn was first breaking, Jesus appears, standing on the shore. The disciples didn't recognize Jesus, possibly because they were far away and the light was not good. However, more than likely, they didn't recognize Jesus because things were different now after the resurrection. There was something different even about Jesus' appearance. Mary Magdalene had had the same trouble recognizing Jesus at the tomb on Easter morning. So did the two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus on Easter evening.

Jesus calls out from the shore, "Children, do you have any fish?" "No", they answer. Then Jesus says, "Cast net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." This must have seemed to be foolish advice to them. After all, they had just spent the entire evening trying to catch fish on their own and had caught nothing. Peter, James, and John had been professional fishermen. What difference would it make which side of the boat they cast their nets on?

Nevertheless, they follow Jesus' instructions. At once, they are successful. In obedience to Jesus' direction, rather than their own professional expertise, and by the power of His Word, rather than their fishermen skills, they catch a huge number of fish. The Holy Spirit even inspired St. John

to record the exact number of fish caught: 153 (probably, as one commentator puts it, because fishermen always like to talk about the number of fish they catch).

When they finally haul this huge catch to the shore, Jesus is waiting for them. There is a fire with fish and bread cooking on it which Jesus has prepared for them. Jesus took the bread and the fish, broke it, and gave it to the disciples. Miraculously, all seven disciples are fed from this small amount of ordinary food and are refreshed and strengthened from their arduous labor.

This account -- the third appearance of Jesus to His disciples after His resurrection from the dead -- appears to be very surreal. It is almost an afterthought to the Gospel which St John is writing. Why is it included here? What is the point of this story?

The point here is that the disciples were *not* to go back to "doing what comes naturally". Life was not the same for them now after Easter as it had been for them before Easter. Everything had changed completely. When they tried to resume the status quo of fishing, they failed and failed miserably.

But the resurrected Jesus came to them to recommission them to the position He had called them to early on in His ministry: as fishers of men. By showing them how to fish and, by His Word, causing them to catch a huge number of fish - 153 in all - Jesus was demonstrating how people would be brought into His Kingdom. Only by following His direction and relying on the power of His Word would people be "caught."

Jesus had called them to be fishers of men at the start of His ministry and had caused a great catch of fish. But, at that time, Peter had said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" Now, Peter acted differently. Instead of running away *from* the Lord, he jumped in the water and swam *toward* the Lord. Why? *He* was different. Before, he had been a sinful unworthy man. Now, because of Good Friday and Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, his sins were washed away and he was worthy to serve in this way. In the previous catch of fish, the nets began to break. But this time, the net was not torn. Things were different now. Because of Easter and Jesus' glorious resurrection from the dead, the kingdom of heaven was open to sinners washed in the blood of the Lamb. Nothing would break the nets of eternal life -- not sin, not death, not even the power of hell itself.

Casting the nets of the kingdom of God would be a huge undertaking for these disciples. They would not make the fish or provide the nets. They would simply follow Jesus' leading and speak His Word and the nets would be filled. Yet it would take them all over the world and subject them to

rejection, suffering, and loss of life. The disciples would need nourishment and strength for that -- something miraculous and supernatural that would allow Galilean fishermen to transform the world with the power of His Word. By feeding them with them with the supernatural breakfast of fish and bread, Jesus was reminding them of the miraculous meal which He had established just weeks ago -- a meal that would provide them with more than physical food, but would give them Himself: His body and blood under the physical bread and wine. By this meal, they would be strengthened spiritually and empowered to follow the leading of the Lord to speak His Word and bring the great catch of people into the kingdom of God.

The message is the same for us today. We are very much like those early disciples. Just a couple of weeks ago, we celebrated Easter Sunday and the glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. But now we've kind of gone back to the status quo in our church and in our lives. The celebration has stopped. The special services have stopped. We have gone back to "doing what comes naturally" in our every day lives, forgetting, like those disciples did, that Jesus is indeed alive.

But Jesus comes to us today in this Easter season. Like the disciples of that day, we fail to recognize Him among us. (That's the reason we have the Paschal Candle lit during the Easter Season -- to be reminded that Jesus is alive and among us.) He looks at us in all of our busyness and our religiosity and says, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" In other words, are you accomplishing anything with your life? Are you doing what I've called you to do?

You may think that you are unworthy or unable or you may be apathetic about it with all the worries and cares of this life. But the Lord is still calling His Church to be fishers of men in this day and age as He did with those disciples along the Sea of Galilee that early morning many years ago. He accomplishes this in the same way as He did then. You don't have to make the fish, find the fish, provide the nets, or convince the fish to come into the nets. You and I listen to the Lord's guiding from His Word and speak that Word of Law in all of its brutality which shows a holy God who condemns sinners and the Word of Gospel in all of its sweetness which shows a loving God who acts graciously to sinners, forgiving them for the sake of Jesus. It is that Word of God which will bring the fish of humanity into the kingdom, not your knowledge of the Scripture, not your skill at speaking, or anything else.

Are you unworthy of being the bearer of that Word? You were, but, because of Good Friday and the death of Jesus on the cross, you have been declared to be worthy before God because all of

your unworthiness has been taken away. Are you too weak to be bearers of the Word? You were, but, because of Easter and Jesus' conquest of death and hell, we have the supernatural strength to bring the Word of God, as pastors and as lay people, to the world without any fear of anything -- not of people, not of death, and not of the devil Himself.

It is a daunting task in our world today. To faithfully follow the Lord's direction and faithfully speak His Word will lead to rejection, ridicule, and possible suffering. We will need nourishment and strength to accomplish it. Jesus feeds us just as He fed those disciples by the shore of the Sea of Galilee. As we walk into church on a Sunday morning, we can hear Him say, "Come and have breakfast." Like with the disciples, Jesus feeds us with ordinary food in a miraculous way. He gives us bread and wine to which He adds Himself -- His body and blood -- along with the promise that our sins are forgiven. We are renewed and refreshed and ready to face the world again to go fishing another week.

Are you going to be "doing what comes naturally"? Should you? Well, if it is to return to the "status quo", put away our Easter baskets and bonnets, and live our lives with gloom and pessimism just like everyone else, then the answer is "no". But remember that you and I live on this side of Jesus' resurrection of the dead and not before it. Everything has changed and we have been changed along with it. We live with peace because our sin before God has been forgiven. We live with joy because our last and worst enemy - death - has been defeated. We live with hope because we know that life is only going to get better into eternity. We have been called by Jesus to bring that message to the world. He accompanies us, feeds us, and strengthens us to do that. We are Easter people who have a whole new nature through our baptisms. We have a whole new way of naturally doing things. So, with that in mind, let us always, during the Easter season and beyond, be involved in "doing what comes naturally." Amen.