

Today is the fourth Sunday of the Easter season and for some reason, a reason that I've never understood, the church calls it Good Shepherd Sunday. So, we have Psalm 23, and collects and readings about sheep and shepherds, and a Gospel reading about Jesus calling himself the Good Shepherd. But I've never able to preach on that Gospel, this season, because why in the middle of the Easter season we have a reading about sheep and shepherds, I don't know.

In this Easter season, I want to talk about the Resurrection, so I've swapped out the Gospel, as I've done before, to put in a Resurrection story because this season of Easter, it's the best time for preachers because the stories are so good, so vivid to preach from, so I'm not going to give up an opportunity to preach on a Resurrection story this morning. So, if you've got a problem, take it up with the bishop.

But I feel pretty confident because my defense would be that I wanted to speak about the Resurrection. And all the Gospel writers have their own Resurrection stories. None of them appear in more than one Gospel, so they're all individual, and they're quirky stories. And the reading we have today only appears in John's Gospel and, like so many of the other Easter stories, to me it raises more questions or as many questions as it answers. They're enigmatic stories. And the story we've just heard raises for me three particular questions that I'd like to share with you.

The first is this: Why is this Gospel story in the Gospel at all? And I say that because I'm about to read the verses that come just before this reading, and they make it sound as if John is finishing off his Gospel. He writes this, this is just the two verses before what we've heard today, "Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." Doesn't that sound as if he's rounding it off, that he's kind of wrapping up and concluding his Gospel?

And then Chapter 21, which we've heard, begins "After these things...", almost like an afterthought. And scholars have noticed that the chapter has phrases and a style that's different to what's gone before, so maybe the church in its wisdom thought we should add something on here by way, almost, of a PS. Why would they do that? Well, no one really knows for sure but let me offer what I think might be a reason.

I think the early church and the writers of this Gospel wanted to add more weight to the Resurrection stories. They wanted to give more evidence to what this amazing event that's gone on, the reality of the Resurrection, they wanted to beef up the story a bit because it was as hard to believe in the Resurrection then as it is now. People there would no doubt, like today, have doubted the Resurrection, thought that the resurrected Jesus was just a vision, a hallucination which came to the disciples. And I think this passage is added to add more weight to the reality of the Resurrection, that the risen Jesus wasn't a vision, that the disciples weren't hallucinating, that they really met Jesus after the crucifixion, and that Jesus was an embodied presence amongst them.

And I find this compelling because this feels like an authentic story. If you were making up a story of Resurrection, you wouldn't put it like this. If you were writing a story to convince people of the reality of the Resurrection, that somebody has come back to life, you wouldn't have, as a punchline, "Come and have breakfast," as Jesus says to the disciples in this story. That's not how Hollywood would do it, because the disciples here are sharing their real experience of the resurrected Jesus, and like so many of the other Resurrection stories that we've heard since Easter, they have a rather downbeat, almost homey feel about them.

I was talking last week about the two disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus. You know, Jesus just sidles up next to them and starts talking to them. And I mentioned the phrase, "A quiet Resurrection." And this story too has that feel of a quiet Resurrection, of Jesus quietly coming amongst his disciples. And this story shows that the resurrected Jesus was not some aloof ethereal figure floating around. This was someone who could make breakfast, cook, make a fire.

They'd been fishing all night. The disciples were hungry and Jesus addresses their physical need, which says something very important about our Resurrection faith. The Resurrection faith is not about escaping from this world. It's about engaging with this world, working with it to make it a better place to build the Kingdom of God. Faith may be spiritual, but that doesn't mean that it's not worked out in the everyday stuff of daily life. Our Resurrection faith is not an escapist faith. It's not merely "pie in the sky when you die". Resurrection faith leads to a deeper commitment to this world. The Resurrection is all about transformation, taking up this world and making it into something new.

And my second question about the passage is this: Why is it so specific about the number of fish that are caught? It says 153. If you, like me, had lots of turbulent teenage romances, you might, like me, have had people say to you, "Well, there's plenty of fish in the sea." To the zoologists at the time, they thought there weren't just plenty of fish in the sea, that they knew the number of how many different types of fish there were in the sea, and you'll guess that number, 153. So that would have spoken to people at the time of inclusivity.

But what we're seeing here is, it's a sign that just as all the fish were gathered into one un-torn net, so this Gospel message that's going out into the world is for all people, that nobody is excluded, that all different types of people could be included within the net of the church without it being torn. And there's a great illustration of the variety, of the kind of people included in this message, in the story itself.

There's Peter, the wildly enthusiastic, passionate disciple who for some reason, when he sees it's Jesus on the shore, jumps into the water. Typical Peter, impetuous thing to do. Then there's John, the much more measured, quiet, spiritual disciple. He quite sensibly rows the boat to shore so they can all get with the fish to the shoreside. He has a more measured approach. John and Peter, two key disciples who play such an important part in the early church, two wildly different personalities, and yet both became very important disciples. What they had in common, Peter and John, was that they made a response to Jesus in their own way.

And the final question I have about this Gospel is why it's commonly known and why the subtitle in my Bible is The Miraculous Catch of Fish, because I'm not sure there's anything terribly miraculous about it. Jesus says to the fishermen in the boat, "Have you caught anything?" "No," the disciples say. So, Jesus says, "Well, throw your nets out onto the other side." And they did, and they caught all these fish. But there's no real suggestion of anything particularly miraculous here. That's how they operated in those days. The fishermen would have somebody on the seashore who'd be guiding them, and if they saw the water ruffled and they knew there were fish there, they'd say to the fishermen in the boat, "Well, put your nets over that side." That's how they did it.

I think what's interesting about this story isn't so much that it's a miracle, but that it's a picture of how the risen Jesus interacted with the disciples after the

Resurrection. He quietly comes alongside them in the course of their regular daily life. There's nothing particularly dramatic about the encounter. What's most impressive is the gentle voice of the Master guiding the men in the boat. It has echoes of the story we heard last week about the road to Emmaus, where Jesus quietly draws alongside the two people. It says, "He, Jesus himself, drew near to them, quietly coming alongside." And that's what's happening in this story here. Jesus meets them whilst his disciples are fishing.

And I find this story resonating with my own experience of encountering the risen Jesus. I haven't had any blinding visions, nothing wildly dramatic that might be called miraculous, but I am familiar with the quiet prompting voice guiding from the sidelines. The disciples could have been so taken up with the act of fishing that they missed the voice that was speaking to them, that they were so overwhelmed with their disappointment in not catching any fish that they missed that Jesus was there amongst them, calling to them. But they heard his voice.

And that's the challenge for us. Are we so busy that we fail to hear Jesus's call amongst the hubbub of everyday life, with all its stresses and strains and busyness? Or do we work hard at finding time to be still, setting time aside to listen to what the risen Jesus might be saying to us? Let's pay attention to that voice.

The risen Lord Jesus still draws alongside his disciples quietly and by his spirit still calls them. We must be ready to hear that voice, which so often gets lost. We must be prepared to hear and to respond. We might be more of a Peter kind of person, responding with enthusiasm and gusto. We might be more restrained, like St. John. But the key is that we are quiet, that we listen, that we hear the voice of the risen Jesus and respond to that call.

Hallelujah, Christ is risen.