

# On the Other Side of Easter

sermon digest

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John 21:1-14

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Welcome to the other side of Easter. We call it “Low Sunday”—the Sunday that follows after all of the drama building up during Holy Week and coming to its culmination in Easter Sunday. It follows the week when ministers wake up on Monday morning realizing it’s over and either head for the hills, leaving a substitute to fill in, or think with some dread about how to follow up the highest moment in the church’s life with the stream of worship services that still stretch out before them. It’s often the occasion of looking out over the diminished attendance and noting in less than pleasant tones the drop in attendance. Where, we ask ourselves, are those Christmas/Easter only Christians today?

More important than the sinking feeling and certainly more important than our cynical observations about fickle crowds is the question: What did those who came last week receive? Rather than assuming that people’s showing up for one or two services a year is indicative of skin deep faith, perhaps we should be asking ourselves about what they and we were looking for when we gathered Easter Sunday morning? A quick fix to carry us across to Christmas? Possibly. But what if it were more? What if our coming together last week indicated just the tiniest break in our protective facade of not expecting too much of ourselves or one another or God or church or life itself? What if last Sunday morning we gathered just in case the alleluias were true? What if our coming together signified just an ember of hope that it all might be real?

Stories unfold, Beverly Roberts Gaventa suggests, because something happens, something disrupts the status quo. A robber invades a peaceful town, a beautiful woman is found dead in a hotel room, wine runs out at a wedding in Cana, a stranger comes on the scene and someone proclaims, “This is the one we’ve been waiting for, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” Something happens and a story takes off and over the next thirty minutes, hour, days or even years it spins itself out until it is resolved in a conclusion. It works itself out and we breathe a sigh of relief. The mystery is solved; the bad guys are rounded up; everyone returns home from the wedding; Jesus is put in a grave and rises again on the third day. The situation resolves into a happy ending, and life returns to status quo [*Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2010, p. 32].

Is that the way it is on the other side of Easter? Do we breathe a sigh of relief and with our hearts lifted just a little bit, return to life as it was before we got there? Does all that we talked about last week have an impact greater than just being a hopeful moment in time that we look back to every now and then in order to get some relief?

It’s very interesting. It is as if the writer of the Gospel of John knew about low Sunday and low Monday and Tuesday. And maybe he did. Writing from the distance of perhaps sixty years from the events of Holy Week and Easter, he had certainly lived long enough to see the church in action and become acquainted with its ebbs and flows. He started his story with a prologue: “In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word became flesh and lived among us.” He unwinds the story of Jesus, coming at last to his death and resurrection and the concluding words: “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” (20:30-31). A happy ending. A good place to wrap the story up and put it in the drawer.

And yet the story continues. Surprisingly, the story picks up where it had left off and John (or someone else) adds another chapter. Why? Some say John or a later editor recognized some loose ends that needed tending. Some say the epilogue was written after John’s death to quell the rumor that Jesus had promised that John would not die. If that were the case, there is still a lot in the chapter left unexplained. Some say it was added to rehabilitate Peter in the face of his denials of Jesus and thus the thrice repeated question, “Peter do you love me?” Yet, as the chapter unfolds, it paints less than a complimentary picture of Peter while giving us a more positive glimpse of the Beloved Disciple (probably John). Some say it was an effort to incorporate some of the stories circulating in the church about Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances in Galilee; and maybe it was; but was that the only or even the primary reason?

What if the stories in John’s epilogue want to say something more? What if they want to say something about low Sunday and Monday? What if they want to say something about what it means to live on the other side of Easter? What if they are written especially for those whom Jesus’ final words describe as those who “have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29)? What if they are written for us?

If chapter 20 provides closure to the story of Jesus, Thomas Long suggests, chapter 21 provides “anti-closure” [*Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2010, p. 33]. Stories that close with a happy ending often leave us contented but expecting little else. Perhaps John or his editor continues Jesus’ story for the exact purpose of saying to us it is a story without end. It is a story that continues in the lives of Jesus’ disciples who pick it up and carry it into the future.

Many preachers have waxed eloquent over Peter’s announcement to the other disciples: “I am going fishing;” and the church has mused over the centuries at the disciples’ ready response: “We will go with you.” Were they throwing in the towel and returning to the life they had known before they hit the road with Jesus? Or were they reflecting on that earlier moment when Jesus had called them to be fishers of people? Overlooking the fact that John does not include the synoptic Gospels’ story of Jesus commissioning his disciples for people fishing, we cannot

really know whether their eventual goal was the bait shop or the seminary. All we can do is follow the story; and the story indicates a pretty dismal scene. John, as he has done at a number of points, paints the picture in terms of daylight and darkness. Just as Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night,” and just as “it was night” when Judas slithered away to betray Jesus, and just as Mary Magdalene came to the tomb “while it was still dark,” it was “night” when the disciples put their boat into the water. Like someone who has heard a good story and leaves expecting nothing more, the disciples seem to return to the water expecting little and little—or, to be more exact, “nothing”—is what they caught. They had seen the risen Christ and believed, John’s first conclusion tells us; but they had not yet begun to absorb what that belief meant to their lives and mission.

And then, “just after daybreak,” like light dispelling darkness, Jesus came. “Children,” he called to them, “you have no fish, have you? Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” Or as Thomas Long puts it, “Cast your net in that direction over there, in the direction of God’s future.” Far from a conclusion, the story of filled nets almost “bursting with abundance” is prelude to a continuing story—a story of life’s journey being transformed if we open ourselves to God and live in constant watchfulness and hope.

Who did Jesus show or reveal himself to be on that early morning? Not, Long suggests, one who guarantees a miraculous catch of fish, but one who is “Lord over an Easter-shaped world.” One who is Lord over a reality in which the powers of death and hopelessness no longer rule.

In a world where the risen Christ is present, the future is arced toward God and things happen. Who knows when a dark world may be suddenly invaded by the bright and joyful light of Easter? This is a world where the feeding of the multitudes with bread and fish is no one-time miracle, but the ceaseless action of a generous Christ, who graciously allows us to drop our net into the sea and participate in the abundance and kindness of God” [Ibid].

Two preceding Galilean miracles resound with the same abundance. Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast with the result of providing the host with 120 to 180 gallons of wine; Jesus multiplied loaves and fishes to feed a multitude of people and 12 baskets of food were left over. The disciples pulled up nets filled almost to bursting with 153 large fish—the haul of a lifetime. Far from just enough to get by, the picture here is one of overflowing abundance. John (or his editor) comes to the end of his Gospel (this time, it really is the end) and concludes: “There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written”.

That, John wants to tell us, is the way it is with Jesus. His story is so full, so expansive that it would “spill out of libraries and warehouses and even the Grand Canyon” [Ibid., 35]. Far from insufficient or just enough to get us by, the grace and hope of Easter is plenteous, stretching as far as the eye can see.

Thomas Long recalls that during the time he was writing his article on John’s closing scene, he was making daily trips to be with his mother who was quietly dying under hospice care. He relates her family’s concern that repeatedly during that process she spoke of being hungry. She was on a feeding tube and the nurses were regularly giving her all the broth and pureed food her frail body could handle. They also sought to reassure the family that his mother’s body, which was shutting down, could no longer feel ordinary physical hunger pangs. Still the family was troubled. One day he walked into the room and found his mother restless. “Are you hungry?” he asked. “Very,” she replied. He only managed to give her a couple of bites before she shook her head. “Slowly,” he said, “it dawned on me. ‘I’m hungry was her way of describing the totality of her circumstance. She was not asking for food; she was saying that everything was slipping away. . . and she was hungry, hungry for more, hungry for the life being taken away from her . . . very hungry” [Ibid.].

Shortly following his mother’s death, Long returned to his unfinished essay and realized in a new way the significance of John’s words. The reason the world could not contain a book recounting all of Jesus’ deeds is because “Jesus keeps on doing them, doing them ceaselessly, doing them every day, doing them in our lives.” In his mind’s eye, Long could see his mother passing through the waters of death and coming up on the other side where Jesus waits with a charcoal fire and fish and bread. “Are you hungry?” Jesus asks. “‘Very,’ my mother surely responded. ‘Very’” [Ibid.].

On the other side of Easter, John is saying to us, whatever the challenge, the net holds strong. Thanks be to God!