

**Sermon – First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC**  
**“The Resurrection Way of Memory” – John 21:1-19**  
**Given by Zack Jackson**

**I.**

Growing up, I spent many an evening fishing in the family pond. In fact, some of my fondest memories involve sitting, fishing pole in hand, beneath the same old sycamore tree along the pond’s edge, watching as the last bits of sunlight filtered through the distant pines. Sometimes, my dad, brother, and I would venture out onto the waters in an old aluminum boat, giving our best effort to bring home the fish we’d eat for supper. Every now and then, we’d catch what we’d refer to as a “mess of fish,” and this meant we’d reeled in an ample amount for one or more meals. Other times, we’d wait and wait, melting in the thick Georgia air and fending off gnats and mosquitos, and we wouldn’t catch one thing. But this didn’t deter us! A few nights later we’d faithfully return to our ancestral watering hole, recalling all the times before when we had caught fish after fish so quickly that our hooks hardly had time to hit the water.

The resurrection way of memory, as our Gospel lesson this week demonstrates, operates something like this. Just when we're convinced that all the proverbial hooks we've cast out into our lives will inevitably return void, we find ourselves recalling the times before when God felt eminently present to us and, by God's providence, all manner of good things returned to us because of our willingness to simply keep casting our line.

## II.

As in last week's sermon, we meet Jesus again in a post-resurrection appearance story. Today, we meet him on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. The text reveals that Jesus "showed himself," but he does more than just show up here. This is a miracle story! What makes this one a bit different than some others is that it comes after all the post-resurrection stories in Jerusalem. In this text, the disciples have moved into Judea, and it is there, some time later, that Jesus appears to them.

At the beginning of our passage, Peter announces to his gathered disciple friends, "I'm going fishing." In this post-resurrection world,

Peter is ready to get back to the day-to-day routines of his life and figures the fish will be biting. So, off he goes with all his fishing equipment to the Sea of Galilee. Now, Peter and the disciples know these waters quite well! They've fished here countless times before, and they know all the best strategies for a successful fishing excursion. Even still, they fish all night, and they catch nothing.

Just as the first bit of light appears over the horizon, they see someone on the shoreline. They don't recognize this person as Jesus, but Jesus knows who they are. From the edge of the water, Jesus watches as the disciples give up their task, convinced they've endured a whole night of fishing with nothing to show for it. Into their despair, Jesus floats out the most simple instruction across the water: "Try tossing your net out into the sea on the other side of your boat!"

Peter and the disciples do so, and let me tell you, they catch a "mess of fish"! 153 fish to be exact, of all sizes and kinds. The precise significance of this number of fish is unclear, but the meaning of this

piece of the story is not: the Jesus proclaimed by John draws in an ecumenical crowd, inclusive and diverse.

Additionally, this text begs us to recall other stories. First, we ought to be reminded of another story we've heard concerning the work of the disciples as fishermen—particularly the one where the disciples are given their more radical call to become fishers of people. Then, we also ought to recall what is, in this text, a repeated reminder of John's Jesus that "apart from me you can do nothing." By alluding to these prior stories, this miracle story sends us right down the resurrection way of memory.

In the final scene of this text, over a breakfast meal of fish and bread which is reminiscent of the last meal the disciples shared with Jesus before his death, we hear a dramatic exchange between Jesus and Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" This encounter brims with symbols we have already seen—for the glow and aroma of a charcoal fire previously surrounded Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus, but this fire burns again. This time, Peter redeems himself, and

what we hear is the confession, three times repeated, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” In response, Jesus bestows on his disciples one last charge, one as simple as it is profound: “Follow me.” By asking the disciples to follow him, Jesus is instructing them to love as he has loved. Furthermore, in the charge to follow him, Jesus is indicating that the disciples’ love for him should translate into their care for his flock.

The very last couple of verses in this week’s text move to the subject of Peter’s martyrdom. Verses 18 and 19 follow directly out of Jesus’ command to “feed my sheep.” Here, Jesus speaks a short parable, contrasting the freedom of Peter’s youth with his captivity in old age. Most scholars read the words “stretch out your arms” as referring to Peter’s own crucifixion, and verse 19 connects Peter’s death on a cross to Jesus’ death in the same mode by describing them both as glorifying God. So, the final portion of our text helps us understand what it means to follow Jesus. Like Peter, we can walk in the Jesus Way by laying down our lives for Jesus and loving like the Good Shepherd loves.

### III.

Today, we inherit the same charge that Jesus gave to Peter: “follow me.” What does this mean for us? Well, as with Peter, Jesus meets us in our doubt and denial, and he simply keeps asking: “Do you love me?” And time and time again, we are extended an inexhaustible invitation to respond: “Yes, Lord, you know I do.” As many times as we might fail to live up to our highest callings, Jesus is prepared to come into sight, offering sound advice from the distant shores of our lives. Like Peter, our task is to heed Jesus’ call.

You see, Peter, as we’ve said, was familiar with the waters he was fishing. He and his friends had drawn up all the schematics and determined their strategy. Doing so, they fished all night, and they ended up with little to show for it. However, when they were present to that stranger on the shore, present enough to hear his still, small voice, they knew to follow his simple, yet effective, command to cast the net on the other side of the boat.

We know Peter and the disciples had to be wondering what good simply casting the net over the other side of the boat could possibly do. This was surely too simple an approach to work—so simple as to seem nonsensical. However, even in the mundane task of casting out their fishing net, something they'd done countless times before, Peter and the disciples decide to give the Jesus Way a try. We know from today's gospel lesson that they reaped a tremendous reward for their obedience.

Our call to follow Jesus sometimes feels a bit like this. The task of walking in the Jesus Way is at once somehow too simple and too profound for us to truly fathom. Even still, if we'll find ourselves attuned to the one who makes himself known in the dawning of new days in our lives, even new days that follow nights of fruitless toil, we might just find ourselves heeding our call after all. We often meet Jesus with resistance, saying, "That's too easy a strategy to work, simply casting the net over the other side. I know these waters better than you!" And Jesus waits patiently for us to follow in his way, prepared to

receive us on the distant shore in something like eternal communion and fellowship.

Indeed, to walk in the Jesus Way, will require that we hand over not just our best fishing strategies to be reimagined in Christ, but our very lives. Jesus forecasts what will come of Peter. Like Jesus before him, Peter's life will end on a cross. And it's this kind of radical similarity we're being called to reflect in our efforts to follow in the Jesus Way. Like Peter, we're tasked with continually showing up to our day-to-day tasks, seeking to follow Jesus, listening attentively for what he'd have us do, even to the end of our days. Throughout our lives, the resurrection way of memory holds us, even in our shortcomings, and reminds us that we're loved endlessly by a God who is forever willing to receive us and gently guide us unto a better way.

#### **IV.**

You know, when I was fishing with my dad and brother all those years ago, I learned something of all of this. The truth is, I was never a very good fisherman. I would get bored if things weren't going like I had



hoped, and I'd become too loud, too rambunctious, or both. I was convinced I had the formula figured out—all I had to do was bait the hook, cast my line, and wait. Simple as that. The problem was that I was never actually very good about waiting. I thought I had this fishing thing figured out, and I'd quickly get rather annoyed if the fish didn't cooperate. Before long, if I hadn't caught a fish, I'd be ready to give up the task and resign myself to simply sitting on the tailgate of the truck and eating all the snacks we had brought with us.

Without fail, just before I'd decide to reel in my line one final time and give up on fishing for the evening, my dad would call across the water and offer a simple word of instruction like: "Be still!" or "Quiet down!" Being the independent young person I was, I never had much faith that following this kind of simple advice would work, and, truth be told, I usually didn't want it to work because I didn't want to prove my dad right. But, I'd give it a try and get back to the task of simply casting my line and waiting with as much patience as I could muster for something to happen. Generally, much to my surprise and chagrin, his

advice would work when I put it into practice, and I'd start catching fish after fish!

## V.

The resurrection way of memory must be something like this—for I imagine it calls us to more still and quiet lives, ones attuned to hear the gentle instruction of Jesus who shows us a better way. This way of course is modeled after Jesus' own way, the way he demonstrated in his own life. Like Peter before us, we are called to have our lives intimately reflect the Jesus Way in the most embodied sense. No part of our lives is not bound up with Christ—indeed, today's gospel lesson illustrates that we'll be best served to heed the call of Romans 12:1, which says: "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering."

The resurrection way of memory demonstrates that we can place our trust in Jesus because he has been faithful to us before. Just as Peter is ushered down memory lane to recall the ways in which Jesus

had been ever-present to him, we too are invited to leverage daily a similar kind of memory—one which keeps us walking in the Jesus Way out of trust in a Jesus who is always prepared to receive us and forgive. In asking Peter three times, “Do you love me?”, Jesus offered him a shot at redemption—an opportunity to replace every former denial of Jesus with a present proclamation of love for him. We too are continually invited into this kind of redemptive love, the kind that restores what had been broken and builds up what was once lost.

## VI.

The resurrection way of memory, it would seem, is in fact a resurrection way of life. Jesus is floating a word of instruction across the waters of my life and yours. For each of us, this gentle nudge of guidance and care will sound a bit different, and each of us will determine a distinct way to respond. Regardless, each word we might be offered is backed by the same core command: “Follow me.” In following Jesus, we can reliably trust him to show up at first light on the far edges of our lives time and time again, waiting for us to see and

recognize him there. Our darkest nights, our gospel lesson illustrates, might just proceed the redemption of our new dawns. This is the Jesus Way after all, for we don't get to Easter without first enduring a few very dark nights.

And each time we are tempted to think we've failed Jesus one time too many, he'll simply ask us again: "Do you love me?" Whether we've denied Jesus three times like Peter or more times than we can count, Jesus will always be prepared to meet us where we are and listen for our lives to speak: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

In the end, the resurrection way of memory doesn't erase our pasts, but it redeems them all the time. We're held in its embrace, constant and true, so that when the seas toss and the fish won't bite, we might be reminded to listen again for a word from Jesus and perhaps cast our line just one more time. Amen.