

Resurrection Has a Place: The Sea

*A sermon preached on John 21:1-19 on Sunday, April 19, 2026,
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I.

Years ago, Josh and I made a promise to each of our kids, borrowing an idea from an author I love. “The year you turn thirteen,” we said, “we’ll take you on a trip anywhere you’d like to go. Just us and you. Your choice.”

We’ll call that the optimism of the early days of parenting – or perhaps the delirium of sleep deprivation! – when in the daily churn of bathtime and teething toys and ear infections, teenage years seem like a lifetime away. Peering off into a distant future, this promise accompanied some audacious assumptions about the shape of our lives with a teenager: namely, about our budget, our capacity, and my parents’ willingness to babysit the other two while we’re away! As age 13 inched closer for Liam, we had to hedge: the trip has to be within the continental United States, and then with the cost of plane tickets, now it needs to be on this side of the country, and so on and so forth.

Months ago, Liam started planning. He wanted a big city with great sports, cool experiences, unforgettable pizza... which sounded to me like a recipe for Chicago. We booked our plans, and sketched an itinerary, and picked the weekend after Easter as the perfect time to catch a springtime Chicago in that narrow window where both the Bulls and the Cubs were still playing at home ... and we *might* not get snowed on!

That’s where we were last weekend, and we had the very best time. Core memories unlocked, every which way we turn. Liam took to the city like a fish to water. Josh loved exploring new parts he’d not seen before. And I

returned to this home I'd had, exactly 20 years after I'd left it with a sure if inexplicable summons to divinity school in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

In these decades, I'd only been back to Chicago once for a friend's wedding, but hadn't had a chance then to visit some of my old stomping grounds like we did on this trip. As we explored, I resisted every urge to pull out Google Maps and let the muscle memory take over instead. Train stations, and street grids, and favorite restaurants – so much of it seemed to come back. We turned down my old street, and the tears were spontaneous: there was the old bakery I loved, the pizzeria which was pretty terrible but reliably open in a pinch, the apartment building courtyard dripping with charm. Here I was: returning to a place in which I once was, a place I felt I knew as deeply as I knew myself at one point, but now in a wholly new season.

I felt a similar alchemy of memory and change nearly eleven years ago in returning to Winston-Salem: not for seminary this time, but for knitting our family's lives with yours as pastor of this beloved community. It's odd and wondrous, that experience of returning to a familiar place. You know that feeling, don't you? Returning to a place can fill you with a warm nostalgia about the way you filled your time there, what dreams you once had on its shores that now have come to fruition, looking with compassion and appreciation upon the person you were then and who you've now become.

But sometimes the return occupies you with dread. Here I am, nowhere close to where I wanted to be. Once more, returning to unemployment. Once more, moving back in with my parents. Once more, at the end of a failed relationship or endeavor. Once more, coming up short on the best laid plans. The muscle memory kicks back in. You remember the familiar motions, now

engaging them, wistful and bitter. Maybe for you, the “where” isn’t so much a place but a time. Maybe for you, birthdays feel like that, once again, returning to that day on the calendar loaded with expectations for how things can be, and that aren’t.¹ *I thought I would have gotten past this by now, you think. I didn’t want to come back here. I thought it would be different. I thought I would be different. And here I am.*

II.

Here *he* was. Simon Peter, that is. You remember Peter. Peter, who was the first to proclaim Jesus the Son of God before anyone else. Peter, who, with abandon, flung himself out on the water to walk toward Jesus. Peter, who offered to build three tents up on the mountain so as to preserve the glory of Jesus’ transfiguration and create space for them to stay there. Peter, *Petra*, the rock upon which Jesus will build his church. And Peter, who in the most pivotal moment of his life, failed his beloved Jesus by denying him three times right around a charcoal fire.

All of that memory and shame follows Peter to the Sea of Tiberias. Jesus was no longer with them, and Peter and his friends were back to fishing. They’d returned to the familiar place: the boats, the nets, the sore arms, the isolation that seemed a comfort for his wounded, aching heart. He does as humans have done throughout all time and space when shattered by life: by retreating into what’s known, and by what’s known, I mean what’s recognized. Expected. Settled. Maybe in the folds of familiarity, this shame he’s been trying desperately to forget will just fade into the background of his life.

¹ A riff on “to the things that cannot be and that are” from G. K. Chesterton’s “The House of Christmas,” <https://lewissociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/House-of-Christmas-by-Chesterton.pdf>

But it doesn't. Not for Peter, not for any of us. Because where shame is, Jesus is there too, with mercy at the ready. They didn't notice him on the shore while they fished. They had a job to do, and income to earn, and mouths to feed. It had been long enough. They had to get on with it! Back to Galilee. Back to work. They cast out those nets and brought them back in, throwing them hard into the dark water with muscle memory that pulls them back to a life *before* they were called to fish for people, back *before* the joy of his Way had captured their imagination, back *before* he had called them to follow. All throughout the dark night, they labored with nothing to show for it. Theirs were empty nets, filled only with the detritus of forgotten items and lost things, an apt metaphor if ever there was one to describe the state of their souls. We know the empty nets too, empty of meaning but full of those stuck stories that get caught in the crevices of our living, the webs of pride and control, the battered stuff of a life that isn't what we'd planned.

They didn't recognize him at first that day at daybreak, not even as he called out to them, "children, you have no fish, have you?" John doesn't say they even recognized him when he directed them to cast their nets on the other side, like the same place but different now, familiar but new. They struggled to even haul in the lot of 153 without the net tearing, there were so many. But when the disciple Jesus loved realized who had been their guide, it was Peter who couldn't wait a moment longer, Peter who covered himself to swim and meet the Lord, Peter who practically baptized himself on the way to meet Jesus again for the first time.

Dripping and breathless, Peter stepped out of the water to find Jesus grilling fish and bread on the beach over a charcoal fire. *A charcoal fire.* It stopped him cold, that scent, as memory does. John says it was by a charcoal

fire in the shadow of the cross on that Friday we call “Good,” where Peter first denied being one of Jesus’s disciples when asked. So when he finds himself on the other side of grief and loss and shame, trying to forgive himself for his greatest lapse of loyalty, it was by another charcoal fire that Peter broke bread with our Lord and shared a filet of fish. I imagine he shook and shivered, wondering where to even begin, wondering if he could even look at Jesus, wondering what feeble words of apology he might find to take back the words of denial he had confessed. I imagine ash flew around a bit, and the smell caused a palpable moment of trauma for him. I imagine he let the sound of the waves fill the silence for a bit, unsure where to even begin. But it was around that seaside fire that forgiveness and mission became the primary feast. Around that fire, the disciples no longer had to wonder who their breakfast partner was, for they knew it was Jesus – something about the way he handled the bread and cut the fish. Around that fire, in that familiar place, Simon Peter heard a new story – *a resurrection story* – and came back to life again.

That charcoal fire at night was the gruel and grub of denial. This charcoal fire at dawn is warmth and sustenance and nourishment. The kind that cooks fish and bread, that puts the past in the kiln of memory. Jesus didn’t scold Peter for his betrayal, nor did he avoid the confrontation either. Jesus feeds him first, nourishing the one bloated by his own self-loathing and regret. Like a mother with her children, Jesus knew what they needed most. He already had some fish, but asked the disciples to bring some themselves. Jesus is always in the business of serving us, feeding us, nourishing us, and then asking us to do our part too. It’s a partnership of radical hospitality, us

and Jesus.² Surely the disciples were all remembering their last meal together, that last supper, but today Jesus says “come have breakfast.” It will become the first meal of their new life together.³

When the meal was done, when Peter was dry and fed, when the waves rocked in the rhythm of return, Jesus asks Peter, “do you love me more than these?” Do you love me more than your old knowing, more than your well-worn patterns and familiar wounds, more than your shame, more than all you used to cling to. “Do you love me more than these? Do **you** love me? Do you **love** me? Do you love **me**?”

Do you notice that Jesus doesn’t ask if Peter *knows* him or *recognizes* him? He asks Peter if he *loves* him, as he does with us. Each answer becomes a new story. Each answer, a new grace. Each answer, with all tenderness and safety needed for shame to give way to reconciliation. Each answer, resurrection in place. “Do you love me?,” Jesus asks. “Then feed my sheep. Tend my lambs.”

III.

Does it sound familiar to you: the miracle, the abundance, the fish, the sea, the recognition? If it called up the feeding of the 5000 from John 6 right by the Sea of Tiberias in sort of a holy *deja vu*, you’d be right. It’s no accident that in his post-resurrection appearances, Jesus teaches with the same material as before. Bread. Fish. A garden. An upper room. A road to Emmaus. And a seaside where once they were called to fish for people. “That’s revelation,” Sam Wells says, “when you come back to something or someone or somewhere and this time realize what, who, or where they really are.”⁴

² Jamie Clark Soles, *Reading John for Dear Life*, p148.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The First Breakfast,” *Gospel Medicine*, p87.

⁴ Samuel Wells, “Making a Meal of It,” *How to Preach: Times, Seasons, Texts, and Contexts*, p159.

When we have revelation – new understanding, new seeing – in place, it changes our relationship to that place. No longer is “there” merely where we hit that dead end, or made that terrible mistake, or felt unable to be free, or made a living but not a life. No longer is “there” where you stood on the edge of the sea of despair and wondered if you could live. And that revelation, that recognition of what’s changed might come with something as simple as casting our nets on the other side of the same boat, same sea, same arms, same motions – translated to your lives. But however it arrives, revelation is whole-bodied and human and touches all our senses and utterly reorients us to the world.

It’s like that ship-builder, or any of us who labor and need to remember that our work isn’t, as the saying goes, to “drum up people to collect wood with tasks and work, but rather to long for the immensity of the sea.”⁵

It’s like a teenager, who discovers something new and returns to claim their place in this world in a whole new way.

It’s like Abigail, and all of us who have found the “haunt of grace”⁶ in the waters of baptism, and who now feel a twinge of remembering and recognition, who and whose we are with every splash.

It’s like you and me, surprised by resurrection right here once again.

IV.

Of the birth of Jesus, the beautiful poet, Padraig O’Tuama, reminds us that “if the incarnation is to mean anything, it has to mean something on our own turf. It has to enter into the clay of our landscape, the texture of our languages, and the tensions of our cultures.”⁷ And if I might add, so too with

⁵ Antoine de Saint Exupéry

⁶ Thanks to Ted Loder for the phrase, *The Haunt of Grace*

⁷ Padraig O’Tuama, *In the Shelter: Finding Home in the World*, p45.

the resurrection of Jesus. If resurrection is to mean anything, it has to mean something in a particular place, in *our* particular place. And there is the invitation for this day: what familiar place is Jesus inviting you to rediscover with newness of life?

Richard reminded me this morning of these words from T. S. Eliot: “The end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.”⁸

When you arrive, look up. Jesus is on the beach. And here you are.
Breakfast is ready.

Amen!

⁸ T. S. Eliot, “Four Quartets”