

WPC
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April 18, 2010

Encore
John 21:1-8, 9-19

Easter Sunday two weeks ago was great. Many of you were here for this year's Easter service. We started the morning with a wonderful breakfast. We had a gaggle of kids for our Easter egg hunt. We waved Alleluia wands and rang bells. The church looked bright and beautiful. Many, many people worked hard to make our Easter celebration memorable.

On that Easter Sunday, I preached on John chapter 20, which contains the well-known stories of the risen Jesus encountering a weeping Mary Magdalene, the fearful disciples, and a doubting, skeptical Thomas. It's the climax of the Christian story – Jesus has defeated death and appears to his disciples. The victory is won, and when we get to the end of chapter 20, the story seems to be over:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the 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, and that through believing, you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31)

The End, right?

But then comes John 21. Tom Long writes, “Because John 20 comes to such an apparently firm and definitive conclusion, John 21 seems like the ‘Extra Features’ or even the ‘Deleted scenes’ on a movie DVD, more of a curiosity and an afterthought than a narrative necessity.”¹ Thus, biblical scholars often call John 21 a “postscript,” an “appendix,” or an “epilogue.”

Some believe this last chapter was written by another author, perhaps a disciple of John, and added at a later time, while others argue that John 21 was the original ending of the Gospel all along, since “the vocabulary, theological perspective, and worldview of John 21 is remarkably congruent with John 1-20, and a shorter Greek manuscript of John has never been uncovered.”²

In any case, throughout the history of the church, the Gospel of John has essentially always included chapter 21, and therefore it’s a crucial element for our understanding of this book. So instead of it being an appendix, I like to think of John 21 as an encore.

What happens when you go to a concert like one given by U2? The group leaves the stage before the audience is ready for them to be done. They get to their feet, clapping and cheering, "Encore!" And a few minutes

¹ Thomas G. Long, “Easter – The Extra Scenes?” Journal for Preachers, Easter 2010, p. 30.

² Long, p. 31.

later they (hopefully) bound back onto the stage, strap on their instruments and launch into the finale: those last few songs the audience had been waiting the whole concert to hear.

What about Jesus? What kind of encore can you play after you've risen from the dead?

John 20 ends with the high of the first Easter Sunday. But now we're post-Easter. It's not as easy to feel "Easter-y" two weeks afterwards. So we can identify with the disciples in today's reading.

One commentator asks, "Where are they? Well, they are back at work. It is Monday, it seems. Sunday may have been great, but no matter how good a Sunday, there is always Monday. Our lives often seem strung between momentary religious 'highs,' when the music and the words are just right and we feel, and we believe. But then there is Monday, and sitting at the desk in the office, well, who can say what we believe?" (William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, April 2004, 22).

So the disciples are back to doing what they did before they met Jesus and he called them to become his disciples. They're fishermen, so they go fishing. This incident only appears in John's Gospel. Simon Peter decides

to go fishing, and the other disciples go with him. They fish all night and catch nothing.

In the morning, Jesus stands on the beach and instructs them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat, at which point they catch so many fish that they can't haul their nets in. John then speaks to Peter and says, "It's the Lord." Peter, as impulsive as always, jumps into the sea and leaves the other disciples to drag the fish to shore. John, who throughout his Gospel is very detail-oriented, tells us that the net was full of 153 large fish, yet amazingly the net was not torn.

Down through the centuries, interpreters of this event have been quite creative in trying to find some kind of symbolism in the number 153. Augustine gave a mathematical approach: 10 Commandments + 7 Gifts of the Spirit = 17; the sum of all numbers from 1 to 17 is 153.

Cyril of Alexandria proposed an allegorical approach: he broke the number down into 100 and 50 and 3. The 100 represents the fullness of the Gentiles; the 50 represents the remnant of Israel; and the 3 represents the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Jerome tells us that the Greek zoologists had recorded 153 different kinds of fish; and so by mentioning this number John may have been

symbolizing the totality and range of the disciples' catch and symbolically anticipating that the Christian mission would bring in all people (or at least all types of people). Christ's church can hold everyone and the net will not tear.

Then there was good old Rupert of Deutz, for whom the 100 represents the married; the 50 represents the widows; and the 3 represents the virgins. I'm not touching that one with a ten foot pole!

Of course, it's just possible that the number carries no symbolism at all. Most of the disciples are fishermen, and when the fish are big you count them, especially if you're poor. As I've mentioned before, John likes to note details in his Gospel.

In any event, I want us to notice that the disciples are doing what they did before they met Jesus and he called them to become his disciples. They're fishing. Does that surprise you at all? Does it surprise you that Peter's response to the empty tomb, to the strange and wonderful appearances of the risen Christ, is to go fishing?

Even these first disciples, who experienced firsthand the resurrected Christ, found it was not possible to sustain their Easter high, to hang onto their Easter faith and Easter joy. So they went "back to the reassuring drone

of ordinary life” (Willimon, 22). Jesus, however, finds them. He appears on the beach and gives them some advice on where to cast their nets. They follow his advice and there is a great catch of fish. And Peter again sees and believes.

After breakfast, we’re presented with a dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Simon Peter, the same disciple who had forsaken him when the going got rough, the one who had denied him three times. The threefold questioning is significant because it corresponds to Peter’s threefold denial of Jesus in the courtyard: Do you know that man Jesus? No. Do you know him? No. Do you know him? No, I don’t know the man!

And now, Peter – Do you love me? Yes. Do you love me? Yes. Do you love me? At this point, Peter was grieved, because he got the point – the threefold repetition of the question that parallels his threefold denial.

Notice during the dialogue that Jesus uses Simon’s full name (Simon, Son of John – not Petey or Rocky) – when parents are really serious, they often use their children’s full names, not nicknames, right? (“Kenneth Kyung, come here this instant!” not “Sonny, I need to talk with you about the car you wrecked last night.”)

Jesus is serious with Peter, but he's also very wise. The only way Simon Peter can have his failure resolved is for him to journey through it again. But Jesus doesn't ask, "Why did you fail me?" He doesn't really dwell on the past. He only talks to him about the present, but he helps Peter to journey through his past. He reminds Peter of his past failure in this gentle way that offers him a chance to try again: "Yes, Peter, I know you're disappointed in yourself – but I've forgiven you. Now let's get on with this business of discipleship – go out into the world and feed my sheep."

Suddenly it's clear why Jesus returns for an encore. Jesus has made this encore appearance for Peter's benefit. As James G. Somerville notes, "In the same way Jesus returned for Thomas, to move him from doubt to faith, he now returns for Peter, to move him from faith to action."³

Perhaps in these days after Easter Sunday, we need that as much as Peter did. We, too, have come down from the peak of Easter Sunday and now find ourselves back to our routine. We have seen the risen Lord and believed, but has it made any difference? Having heard the invitation to follow Jesus, we need to make sure we now act on our faith.

When the risen Christ comes to us, he calls us into ministry. Notice Jesus doesn't just say to the disciples on the beach that morning, "I'm Jesus,

³James G. Somerville, *Christian Century*, April 15, 1998, p. 395.

raised from the dead.” He says, “I’m Jesus raised from the dead who has work for you to do.”

He tells them to “feed my sheep.” Even though Peter and the other disciples had failed him, Jesus is able to resolve and forgive the past. And then, he sends us out into the world for mission.

What work is the risen Christ calling you and me to do? When he says, “Feed my sheep,” what do you think this means for us?

Think about this tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. The risen Christ comes to us, calls out to us, and asks the same questions of each one of us that he asked Peter: Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? If you do, then I forgive you. Now go out into the world and feed some sheep. Amen.