

**Sermon: April 10, 2016 (Easter 3) – John 21: 1-14**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

“Have you caught any fish?” yelled the stranger from the shore. “No” came the terse, one-word answer from the boat, to which the man on the beach said, “Well, then, try casting your nets on the other side and see what happens.”

Fishing on the other side of the boat is a wonderful metaphor for life in general, and Church life in particular. Before investigating further, three points bear mentioning:

- 1) Although exhausted and either desperate or exasperated at having caught nothing all night, the disciples didn't balk at the suggestion that they try something different.
- 2) There is no suggestion that they knew it was Jesus on the shore – that realization came later.
- 3) There was abundance when they did cast their nets on the other side, such great abundance that it almost exceeded their capacity – but not quite.

The first point, **the willingness to try something different**, is perhaps the most surprising. Or maybe it's not surprising at all.

Not all of the disciples had been fishermen before Jesus called them to ministry, but some of them had, and I assume those are the lads out fishing this day. They were neither inexperienced nor incapable at this task. What they would have been, was emotionally exhausted. Their travels with Jesus, while deeply rewarding, ended with his being put to death by crucifixion. Now, having seen Jesus once after his resurrection but with no indication that further encounters would happen, they had to get back to the basics while hoping to be inconspicuous enough that the authorities wouldn't hunt them down, too.

In that emotional space – and with no success whatsoever in the morning's cast – I can't imagine myself being too open to a stranger on the shore telling me how to do my job. But in their emotional and spiritual exhaustion, perhaps this was a group that had learned one of life's great lessons: when you hit rock bottom, the only direction is up. And when you hit rock bottom, that hand reaching out to you may well be the hand of Christ, encouraging you through thought and supporting you through companions.

Which brings us to the second point – **the recognition of Christ in the midst** of this unusual story.

They didn't recognize Jesus right away when he called from the shore, but in John's version – unlike Luke's story from the Emmaus road – the recognition didn't have to wait until they were breaking bread with him. Somehow, the beloved disciple recognized Jesus in the midst of the situation and he told Peter, still heartbroken at denying Jesus.

Sometimes we recognize God's holy presence through specific, caring actions when we are in the midst of our need. It may come through the healing hands of one of our Healing Pathway practitioners...or through the thoughtful words or kind deeds of someone you barely knew before... or in the sharing of communion, the sacred meal where Christ's reconciling presence is known.

But there are other times when Jesus is discovered in the mundane, and that's the beauty of this story in which Jesus and his friends reuniting over breakfast. Rev. Scott Hoezee, noting how tame many of the post-resurrection encounters are, when contrasted with the miracle stories and hard-edged preaching earlier in the gospels, writes: “We are so desperate to imbue the resurrected Jesus with cosmic meaning that we do not remain content to let him show up in so ordinary a circumstance and performing so common a set of tasks. But when we think about it...we probably need to see Jesus in exactly the everyday set of circumstances that John depicts.

“Because isn't that where we need to encounter the Savior, too? We don't need only a stained-glass Jesus who is other-worldly and who speaks words only meant for the holiest and most obviously sacred of events and occasions. We need a Jesus in the kitchen, ‘amid the pots and pans’ as Theresa of Avila put it. We need a Jesus on the beach and at the office, in the car with us and while shopping at the mall. We need a Savior who accompanies us on our everyday journeys, who sees us in those ordinary circumstances, and who speaks into those times and places, too.... I'm quite content with the Jesus on the beach, tending a fire, sizzling some perch, and saying to his friends, ‘Have some breakfast.’”

And then there's the third point: **the possibility of abundance**, and our capacity to handle abundance. At Bible Study this week we looked at this scripture, which is pretty clearly talking about evangelism and

“catching” new followers for Jesus, and realized that one of the worries that the disciples had was whether their nets would hold. Well, the nets did hold, and they will hold.

As many Churches dwindle, and in the province of Alberta during the recent downturn, it is so easy to get drawn in to a culture of scarcity, where all we see is what we don't have without any sense of what we do have. It is so important for us here, especially in the affluent northern hemisphere, to get past a sense of entitlement and embrace a culture of gratitude. Sometimes that takes the form of that old advice your parents used to give you, “count your blessings” and other times it means grabbing hold of the creativity and resilience that lives within you, finding new ways forward, and expecting to be surprised – expecting new abundance or a new type of abundance, welcoming new capacity to love and grow, as our lives come to be shaped even more by the will of God.

If I focus my energies on getting what I feel I am entitled to as some sort of God-given right, I put myself in such a different position than when I embrace life with gusto and see what surprises God has in store for me today. When we open ourselves to God's true abundance, we do so with open eyes and open hearts, both honest and compassionate in relationship with our struggles, and the hard times of others.

These three points – trying something new, looking for the presence of the Divine, and making room for abundance – do show up time and again in our lives. Many of us have had life events demanding that we fish the other side of the boat. Whether it's a health crisis, or the loss of a job, or the death of a loved one, life does not always unfold the way we would like it to.

In some circumstances, such life changes are so devastating that life basically ends, or at least it sure feels that way. The exhaustion is too great, God's presence no longer seems real or meaningful, and the notion of abundance seems like a cruel joke or even a betrayal of the old beloved ways.

But there are other stories, where abundance is just around the corner. I saw the power of fishing on the other side of the boat up close for the first time, in the life of my late sister-in-law, Laurie. Laurie was trained as a graphic artist in the late 1970s, back in the days when you used pencils and rulers and pen and ink and lettraset rub-on-letters... and about five minutes after she graduated with her Bachelor of Fine Arts, the personal computer came on the market and all of the expertise she had developed was obsolete.

So, armed with a good eye for layout and absolutely no computer experience, she re-learned her trade from scratch, and within a few years was not only one of the lead hands at a design house, but was travelling to other nations to teach them how to set up digital print shops of their own. Laurie lived her all-too-brief life by the motto that when life knocked you down, the first step was to lament what you'd lost (for a fixed period of time) and the next step was to find the next step, and take it. Staying stuck, or continuing to fish the same waters, was not an option. Life can be cruel, but if we can find resilience, through our faith and our character and the support of trusted companions, there can be new abundance. Resurrection, you might even call it.

The same three points – trying something new, looking for the presence of the Divine, and making room for abundance – also play an important role in the Church. Nearly four years ago, the United Church of Canada did a thorough-going study of the future of the Church, and the report that emerged in February 2014 was called – wait for it – “Fishing on the Other Side.” These came back to us at the congregational level, and visionary leaders like Mary Shearer helped us work through the materials and give our feedback to the national Church. Final proposals, called remits, will get voted on by each pastoral charge, with topics ranging from how we organize ourselves geographically, to how we understand and support ministry. You will hear more about those in the coming months.

Although I must admit to some disappointment that the final version of these proposals is not nearly as bold as the first draft, I sense new energy as we look at actually doing something rather than crying the blues about the Church not being as big and young and vibrant as it was in 1963. There is a willingness to hear new suggestions, there is a clear-sightedness as we look around to see where Christ is to be found in its midst, and there is an openness to be surprised by the kind of abundance that could very well come our way if we cast our nets in different waters.

It's in this spirit that we're having a special meeting tomorrow night at 7:00, to see what Christ has for us in the area of youth and young adult engagement. Although our Sunday numbers are pretty good, we are nowhere near as diverse or young a group as we would like to be. We love and value how we have been enriched by the young people who are in our midst, and hope to have a much greater reach with

your/their age group. Yes, there's a concern for the long-term viability of the Church within this but more that that is a sense that the spiritual needs of the youth and young adults of Canmore are dreadfully under-served at the moment, and it's time for us to see if a new heart can emerge for this ministry. Come and join us, whether you picture yourself working in the boat, swimming in the sea or shouting from the shore.

In all of this, we have a companion. He's the one tending the charcoal fire, waving to us, calling us by name. In the midst of life's challenges, in a society that needs to know that there is more to life than meets the eye, may the accompaniment of the risen Christ encourage you to take the risks and make the changes that can open you to new abundance in life. Amen.

*Resources cited:*

Hoezee, Scott. *Easter 3C – Sermon Starters* at [http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-3c/?type=the\\_lectionary\\_gospel](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-3c/?type=the_lectionary_gospel)

The United Church of Canada – Remits. <http://gc42.ca/remits> (which grew from the original "Fishing on the Other Side" report)

© 2016 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church