**Frustrated Fishermen**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

For the Third Sunday of Easter, April 14, 2013

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

The holiest place in the church I attended growing up was not the altar, not the side chapel where you could pray privately, nor was it Sunday School classroom, the columbarium or the library. It was the Koi Pond in the courtyard where Coffee Hour was usually held. At least, it was for anyone under the age of ten. I spent many a coffee hour standing shoulder to shoulder around that pond with my siblings and friends -- like penguins at the South Pole huddling on the edge of the ice flow -- contemplating how to push my brother in without getting myself wet.

The other thing we liked to do standing around the Koi Pond, was try to catch the fish. This pond seemed enormous to us, but in reality it was just a square, probably four feet to each side. There were no poles or rods or reels. We would lean over as the tranquil fish hovered in the water, get our hand as close to the surface as we could, and then strike quickly, hoping to grab a tail or a fin or something. Of course, the fish and their nervous systems detected the movement as soon as our fingers broke the surface tension of the water, and they quickly escaped. Every single time. For ten years. That didn’t stop us from trying, but we quickly became frustrated fishermen – and after a few attempts each Sunday, we gave up and moved on to some other diversion until the seemingly endless coffee hour was over.

I imagine that the disciples in today’s Gospel passage were similarly frustrated fishermen. They had fished not just for a few minutes, but all night. And they were not ten year olds, but rather were professional fishermen. This was their skill, their livelihood. And they’d caught nothing. Despite all their efforts and another sleepless night; they’d struck out.

Perhaps their hearts just weren’t in it that night. Though Jesus had appeared to them once since his Rising, it’s not clear from the Fourth Gospel how long it had been since that happened. It almost feels like they didn’t really know what to do with themselves, these disciples. It feels like the Jesus movement, which has so enriched their lives, given them purpose and meaning, had just kind of dissipated. Like they had just gone back home to Galilee, gone back to doing what they’d done every day of their lives until three years ago when Jesus had come and called them from their nets to follow him. Maybe, in their confusion, in their lack of direction or purpose, they were just going through the motions of life – doing what their bodies naturally wanted to do because it had been their pattern for years, decades, until Jesus had interrupted them. And of course, they had to eat.

But on this day, the routine wasn’t working anymore. The old patterns of their lives had been interrupted, and I think the meaning of their empty nets is that no matter how familiar and ingrained those patterns of life were for them -- there could be no going back. Not after Jesus. Not after the adventures and intimacy they had shared with him. Not after he’d washed their feet. Not after he’d appeared to them. Not after he had breathed on them. Not after he’d forgiven them, and given them the power to forgive others in his name. Too much had happened. They’d been changed, no longer catchers of fish, but now fishers of people, just as Jesus had promised.

This story, appearing at the very end of John’s Gospel just a few verses before the conclusion of it, is a parallel to a familiar scene at the start of Jesus’ ministry. In that scene, you remember, Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee and calls to some of the disciples, saying, “Put down your nets and I will make you fishers of people. Follow me.” And they did. That’s how it all began for many of those disciples. Today’s encounter with Jesus is so similar. Disciples in the fishing boats, Jesus, though unrecognizable at first, standing on the shore. It’s almost like Jesus is re-creating the experience of their original invitation to follow him, to share in his journey. As if he’s inviting them again to break out of their routine – to see a reality larger than the one they were living in day after day after day – to follow him again.

But this journey will be different. Jesus is no longer wandering from village to village, healing and teaching and challenging the authorities. Jesus in fact will no longer be with them in body much at all. The life that he is inviting the disciples to share with him now is his Risen life. This time he is inviting them not to be his earthly companions, but instead to become his presence in the world. This “Follow Me” isn’t meant to be taken literally. They’ve already had that part of their journey. This “follow me” is meant to be heard as, “Follow me in how you live your lives. Follow me in how you love and serve each other. Follow me in how you gather others around the truth of God’s love and compassion, and in how you build a world of justice, freedom, and reconciliation.

I find it especially comforting that Jesus feeds them in preparation for this new mission. He cooks them breakfast on the beach, at sunrise, over a bonfire. It’s almost romantic. Well, maybe not romantic, but intimate to be sure. After all, Jesus is inviting them to become his presence in the world now. To be the voice of Divine forgiveness and compassion and to help others to find that voice within themselves. He better give them a good meal, because this mission is going to take some serious effort.

And of course, their mission is our mission. Jesus’ invitation to follow him in this new way, to become the presence of Christ in the world, is not just for Peter and Andrew and James and John and the others. It’s for us too. We too are invited to become the voice and body and presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Now, if you’re like me, in your adult life you go in and out of phases in which this mission seems clear and engaging to you. At times, it is easy to see myself as part of the body of Christ in the world – as an agent of God’s mercy and forgiveness and redemption. Making willing sacrifices to spread compassion and love in the world. At other times, I feel like the disciples at the start of today’s story. Kind of confused about what I’m supposed to be doing, or why I care about that mission exactly. Maybe even a bit disillusioned, because the path I thought was the one following Jesus turned out to bring challenges and hardships that I hadn’t anticipated...and I wasn’t seeing the fruits of my commitment just yet. And so I fall back into the regular patterns of my life as it was before Jesus had interrupted them…until in some unexpected way, I hear Jesus calling to me again, saying remember who I have helped you become, and follow me again.

I’m not going to lie: this kind of two steps forward, one step back life of faith frustrates me at times. I like to proceed directly from intention to action to completion, quickly, if possible. I’m sure if I’d been on the beach with the disciples in today’s Gospel, I would not have been a very fun person to be around. Angry about the empty nets. Unsure what I was supposed to be doing. Not sure how to feel about the past three years and the commitments I’d made to Jesus and what that all meant for me now.

But you know, that kind of occasional frustration and confusion keeps me human, it keeps us all human -- and hopefully a little humble, too. Our frustrations with our lives and our faith, how we reflect on them, respond to them, and change because of them, are how we grow. It’s just the way in which God brings us from one place in our lives to the next – a natural kind of ebb and flow in the life of faith. Faith is cyclical, without being repetitive. Dynamic, without being predictable.

So whether you’re nets are full or empty at this moment in your life, whether your soul is content or confused – each of us at Eastertide is invited to follow Christ into this new Risen Life – to be his presence in the world in new ways that will heal each other, heal the world, and in doing so, heal our own souls as well.

Theresa of Avila, a 16th century mystic, puts this invitation into the Risen life of Christ in the following words. As you listen, I invite you to close your eyes, and to hear in them, Jesus inviting you, once again, to become his presence in the world:

Christ has no body now but yours,

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,

Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world,

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,

Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,

Yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now but yours.

Amen.