

John 21:1-19
April 18, 2010

South Plains

Now What?!

The infamous US Army General Amos T. Halftrack looks out his window and sees Private Beetle Bailey standing at attention with a bucket on his head. “Now What?!” says the General. Or, he looks up from the martini he’s drinking at his desk and sees the gorgeous Miss Buxley dancing with Private Zero. “Now What?!” Or, he walks around the corner of the barracks and bumps into Sergeant Snorkel holding a flower in his teeth. “Now What?!” is the poor General’s response to most of what happens in Camp Swampy.

Some of us may feel that way about the weeks after Easter. The tomb is empty. Now What?! The story of the resurrection of Jesus is amazing enough to disorient us and leave us wondering what to do with the incredible information that Christ is raised from the grave. I think that’s one reason the 21st chapter of the gospel of John was written. The story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is finished at the end of chapter 20. The conclusion of the gospel says,

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his 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.

Amen. End of story. John 21 is an epilogue, a little postscript to this gospel, illustrating what came next for some of Jesus’ closest followers, and what comes next for us. They seem to be a little unsure of themselves, at loose ends for direction since Jesus appears and disappears after that resurrection day. Peter says, “I’m going fishing.” And the other disciples who are with him say, “We’ll go with you.”

It’s reassuring to pick up the old net, spread it out on the beach to check for holes, then load it into the boat and shove off to look for fish. The best fishing was ordinarily at night, but this night produced nothing. Nada. Every time they hauled the net back into the boat the only thing they caught were pieces of seaweed and the occasional driftwood. They were about a hundred yards off shore when a familiar voice called to them, “Try the other side of the boat. You’ll find some fish there.” People who are fishing will differ in the way they respond to suggestions like that. But, Peter and his friends had fished all night with no success. So they tried the other side of the boat; and they had so many fish in their net they couldn’t bring them in.

That’s when an unnamed disciple cried out, “It is the Lord!” It had been a hot night in Galilee, so Simon Peter had stripped to his underwear to work. When he heard that the voice on shore had come from Jesus, he pulled on his clothes, jumped into the sea and splashed through the waves to land. The others came in the boat,

dragging their net full of fish. What they found was Jesus standing at a charcoal fire. "Come and have breakfast." The gospel says they knew it was the Lord, but they did not dare ask the questions running through their minds: Who are you, really? Where did you come from? What...?

As though it were any morning, Jesus takes bread and passes it around. Then he does the same with the fish. After breakfast, he turns his attention to Peter, the one who betrayed him three times in the courtyard of the high priest. And, three times Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Three times Peter confesses his love. By the third time he loses his composure and blurts out, "Lord... you know that I love you."

Now, anyone who loves Jesus can begin to see what happens after the resurrection among Christians. Jesus does not ask if the disciples really believe that the tomb was empty. He doesn't want to know how they explain his appearances. He begins with the most simple and dangerous question that human beings ask one another, "Do you love me?"

When your spouse asks that question, you know you're in trouble. It is not adequate, to toss off a quick, "Sure, baby, you know I love you." It's never enough to reply that you cook the meals or mow the grass or deposit your paycheck in a joint account every month. Jumping into the water and running through the waves to meet your beloved is nice, but that's not an adequate

response either. "Do you love me?" demands a lifetime of answers. After Easter we have a lifetime to answer that question: Do you love Jesus?

Some answers will grow out of everyday work whether we fish for a living, drive a truck, herd children to school, stare at a monitor, or volunteer in our community. Any task will face some disappointment and discouragement, and any task can be done faithfully with love. Peter would become an evangelist who fishes for people. I've never particularly liked the idea of evangelism as hooking people like fish in order to reel them into the church. Fishing with a net is gentler. But, the point here is that followers of Jesus are not casting about anywhere. Disciples will be listening for instructions from the shore. I have not been able to discover the significance of 153 fish in the disciples' net. I doubt that it's a random number. More likely it is specific to show us that when God gives instruction, we can expect a specific result.

Jesus goes on to tell Peter what kind of future he can expect from loving Jesus. It's not the picture of an easy life.

When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go. (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)

(21:18-19)

Two contemporary images come to mind. One is of a physical therapist using a belt to support and guide a debilitated patient who is learning to walk again. The other image is of the sheriff's deputy walking a shackled prisoner to his fate. Legend tells us that the Apostle Peter was martyred, and at his request was crucified upside down so he would follow, but not imitate his Lord's crucifixion.

All this is to say that our response to the resurrection of Jesus is like sweet and sour sauce. We are commanded to love one another as Jesus loved us. And, this love is sweeter and more satisfying than any words we may speak or any other kindness. It is love with substance, love incarnated in action. It's the kind of love glimpsed in a meal shared with people we know and with people we are coming to know in a completely new way.

But, it's not all sweet. It is also sacrificial love; love for a stranger; love that cares for the homeless; love speaking truth even when it costs comfort. For some, it is love that lays down its life. The way we use the word, "love" is almost too tame a word to describe the bravery of rescuers who traveled miles through the Upper Big Branch coal mine in West Virginia in the hope of finding survivors. It is not just sweet romantic love that keeps a wife faithful to a husband injured by a land mine in Iraq.

And, it is not a trivial love that teaches children in Sunday School week after week.

"Feed my lambs... tend my sheep...feed my sheep;" those are the instructions Jesus gives Peter. Fellowship after church, the Ungroup, snacks for Vacation Bible School – these are all ways we literally feed the flock at South Plains. In John 10, Jesus calls himself the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He goes on to say, "I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice (v 16)."

How could he say it more clearly? Jesus has others he would call through this congregation: your neighbors and acquaintances, perhaps there is family. There are persons who need the abundant life of the gospel who may be waiting for you to invite them to church.

People open to Christian friendships.

People hoping for a word of acceptance from God.

People looking for the firm values on which to build a home.

People ready to serve others if only there were an avenue of service, and someone would say, "Come join our group. We can work together."

"Feed my sheep," says Jesus.

The abrupt and startling conversion of Saul on the Damascus road is one response to the resurrection. In that instance, the resurrected Christ appeared to Saul

and called him to mission. Some of us may have had dramatic conversions. Many of us are nurtured into faith, slowly and steadily by the teaching and example of others. That's another response to the resurrection. We can see different responses in the lives of two prominent disciples as they eat with Jesus around that charcoal fire on the seashore. Peter is impetuous and loud and enthusiastic – all qualities necessary for the young church in the book of Acts. There's an unnamed person who is called in the gospel of John "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He's the one who first recognized it was Jesus standing on the beach. He's the one who ran to the empty tomb with Peter, the disciple reclining next to Jesus at the last supper. He never made a name for himself as a leader in the church. We know him only as the one Jesus loved.

The other thing we know about this second disciple is that when Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me," it was not only Peter who followed. The disciple whom Jesus loved also followed. Jesus didn't have to ask him the question he puts to Peter and to us, "Do you love me? Do you love me?"

"Follow me."