

“A Real Fish Story”

Dear friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

All throughout Jesus' ministry, he used stories from things in our physical life to illustrate (and teach) truths about our spiritual life. He also was (involved in) stories that, in the process of (living them out), pointed to truths beyond the actually stories themselves.

Today's story is one of those stories. It's a fish story. It's not one of those tall-tale, hard-to-believe fish stories that almost everyone who has fished has told. Like the one that was “this big” at the side of the boat. “I almost had him in and he got away!” (Sure you did.) “Or the day I caught those 14 fish at the lake, but decided to throw them all back because I just wasn't that hungry.” (I'm sure you weren't.) We've all heard those stories.

This is one of those fish stories. And it is a “tall tale” of a story (to be sure), because it's hard to believe what actually happened, and it has never happened since. But it did happen. It's an account of one of the ten appearances Jesus made to his disciples, recorded in the New Testament, during those 40 days after his resurrection (on Easter) and before his ascension (into heaven).

Last week we heard about two of those appearances. The first was on Easter evening, to the ten disciples who were there in that upper room. Jesus appeared to them and showed them his hands and his side. The second, (one week later), with Thomas (who wasn't there) on that first week, but this time who was. As a result, he came to believe.

Today's story is one of those post-resurrection appearances. It takes place by the Sea of Tiberius, more commonly known as the Sea of Galilee. It turned out to be a breakfast meeting. Seven of the disciples were together. (Keep that number in mind. We'll come back to it in a moment.) Seven of them were there: Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two others unnamed.

Early in the evening (it seems), the night before, Peter had decided to go fishing. (You heard the story.) The others (who were there) said, “We'll go with you”, and they did.

Now, for some of them, it might have been a trip just for fun. But for others of them, at least (three of them), they'd done this many times. They were fishermen (by trade) before they were called by Jesus. They had the boats, the nets, all of the necessary equipment. It wasn't just for fun, this fishing. It was for a purpose.

And so, they went out (it says) and fished all night. And as has happened, I'm sure, any of you (here today) who have done any fishing at all, it says “they caught nothing.” Rather frustrating, I'm sure, all night.

Now, I guess, for those (like myself) who do this fishing thing just for fun, it's not that big of a deal when the fishing happens and there are no fish. You know how it goes: “The worst day fishing is better than the best day working.” I love my job, but I can relate.

But all night long! They were tired and had nothing to show for it. Then Jesus shows up and they don't know that it's him. (John tells us), Jesus called out to them, “Friends, haven't you any fish?”

That's the natural question, I guess. “How's the fishin'?” “How many did you catch?” “Having any luck?” Given the circumstance, it was sort of a slap in the face for those commercial fishermen. I doubt if they laughed. I don't know what they were thinking. (I'll bet Jesus was smiling.) Who knows? It doesn't give any detail. They just said, “No.”

Then comes the suggestion (if not the command) from Jesus. “Then throw your net on the right side of the boat and you'll find some.” Again, I wonder what those experienced fishermen must have thought about this random, (who knows who he is), guy on the shore telling us what to do. All we're told (in the story) is that they do it, and when they do it the nets were filled.

Now, it's not central to the story, but it's worth mentioning. When they obeyed the command of Jesus, it happened. When they did what Jesus asked them to do, what they were (not able to do) on their own was able to be done and it took place. There's a lesson in that for us. I'll let you figure it out. I think it's obvious.

This also wasn't the first time this had happened. (Maybe you remember?) It happened (also) earlier in Jesus' ministry when some of those (same disciples) were first called. Luke records that story in his gospel.

Sometimes it takes more than (one time) for a lesson to sink in and for us to learn. There's another lesson (in that) for us. I doubt if I'm the only one.

Then it says, "One of the disciples, the disciple Jesus loved – that's how John (the gospel writer) speaks of himself. He said (to Peter), "It is the Lord." He realized it was Jesus.

And that's when Peter grabs his clothes, jumps into the water, swims and wades to shore, and the rest of them follow in the boat, dragging a net full of fish. It says "they were about a hundred yards off." And when they land, there was a fire burning, with some coals, some fish (already on) the fire, and some bread. And they sat down (with Jesus) and shared a meal.

What a beautiful picture (in this story) of the early church in fellowship with their risen Lord and with each other, enjoying a meal provided by his grace and power. On their own, their efforts produced nothing. Obedience to him brought about immediate and lasting "success."

And so, what's in this story (from those 40 days) for us to take home and take to heart? Obviously, for those early followers, it was a necessary and an important resurrection proof. It plays that same role for us as well. It actually did happen. But what else?

Let's start with some of the detail. We don't always get (all of the detail) in many of the stories we find (in the Bible), so when (we find it), we don't want to miss it.

It says there were 153 fish in the catch. It's interesting that it says the (actual number), instead of just saying "the nets were full." There has been (a lot of) speculation about this (by different scholars) over the years. To me, it's interesting, if not fascinating when you start to dig.

Of the four gospel-writers we have, (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), John is the one most given to symbolism, and he's certainly the one who makes the most use of numbers and their meaning, especially in the book of Revelation that is filled with numbers.

This approach to some of the biblical truths we find is called numerology. The numbers 3, 7, 10, 12, 40, and 1,000 (and multiples thereof) are found in many places in the Bible. It's a mathematician's dream. If we had the time, we could spend hours.

Anyway, the number 153 is one of those numbers you can arrive at by adding $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5$, and so on, in this case up to 17. Don't start doing this (in your head) right now, because you'll miss the rest of the sermon. But when you do it, you come up with 153.

Now, the number 17 is $10 + 7$, both significant numbers. 10 fingers, 10 toes, the 10 lepers, 10 days between the ascension and Pentecost. Ten to the third power is 1,000, (the millennium), the ten commandments, and so on. It's a number denoting fullness or completeness.

The number 7, it's the same thing. It's a number associated with perfection. 7 days of the week, the 7-fold gifts of the Spirit, the number of times Jesus told us to be ready to forgive, 70 times 7, the 7 churches in Revelation, and (in relation to today's story), the 7 disciples who were there when this fish story took place. We could spend all day.

Now, I don't want to bore you with all of this, nor lose our focus, but the number 153 can also be thought of as one of those "perfect numbers," indicating God and his fullness. It's even been said that at the time when this all happened (in the New Testament), there were 153 known kinds or species of fish. Today we would identify a lot more. But (in those days), if that was true, then the number 153 could have been symbolic of catching everything there is in the fish family.

Here's the point. Whatever you might think about this use of numbers and their significance, we don't want to dismiss it too quickly. There's a lesson here about the mission of the Church and its calling to go out and bring in people from all nations.

Think back to how this all started, when Jesus first called Peter and Andrew, James and John, (he said), "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Only a few days later, after this event on the shore, he would say the same thing, just before he would leave this earth, commissioning those disciples (and the entire Church) to "go into all the world and make disciples of all nations."

That's right, all 153 kinds of fish, all races and colors and nations and ages of people – none are excluded. Whether you're a jellyfish or a rainbow trout or a large-mouthed bass, the gospel is for you. Whether you're a man or a woman, an infant or a senior, poor or rich, black or brown, yellow or white, a Ph.D. or an illiterate, it doesn't matter. God's great saving net wants to take you in. Jesus is for everybody. Some would deny it, but it's still true.

This true story is filled with symbolism. The net itself is one of those symbols. One of Jesus' teachings, in one of his parables, he said "The kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind."

Call it the Church (if you'd like), or call it the gospel which (the Church) proclaims. It's all the same. The Church is the means used by God to bring in the people. And no matter how many are caught, the net doesn't break. That's what it says. "...even with so many fish, the net was not torn." In other words, keep on fishing. There's always room for more.

Or, if you want to keep this going, sometimes the boat is a symbol for the Church. Noah's ark kept and protected the saved. When the storms came up on the Sea of Galilee the disciples were secure in the boat and Jesus stilled the storm.

Even the symbolism of the fish itself, you see it on bumper stickers or on banners. In the Greek language, the word "ichthus," inside of that fish symbol, contains the letters which are the initials for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." The story is filled with symbolism.

Now, pull it all together and it's even more symbolic. You and I, who know Christ as Son of God and Savior, are the ones who are already in the net, in the boat, in the kingdom. And having been caught, we've also been transformed from being fish (who've been caught) to becoming fishermen who are (sent out) to catch.

Call it the mission of the Church. Call it evangelism. Call it outreach or discipleship or give it another name. This casting the net for Jesus has been and is and (always will be) the #1 mandate we've been given, our primary task. It's why we exist. It's what we're about. And it's so easy to become distracted and off course.

You know how that works. All of the "in house" activity we get involved with, the things we get so used to doing (and that we enjoy), it's possible to forget why we're here, if we're not careful. When the time comes that the church spends all of its energy keeping the internal machinery going, that's when the church has lost its purpose.

We have a message to tell the world and it's a message that (if we don't tell it), it'll never hear: the good news of forgiveness and life and freedom in Christ. This is the Easter season. Christ rose. He lives. And so we live and will also rise in him. Without that message at the core of what we're all about, we're like the disciples who fished all night in that boat and caught nothing.

And, to push it even further, we dare not identify this mission (of the Church) only with the large body, the institution. This is an individual calling involving every one of us. We are the Church, each of us in the things we do on a daily basis. Wherever we go: in our neighborhoods, in our communities, in our schools, in our vocations, among our friends, in our leisure time, and (for certain) in our homes and with our families. That's where it happens.

Now, there are things we do together and they're important things for us collectively to be about. Our Grow Groups, our St. Tim's Kids, the working we're doing in our Preschool and MOPS and (what's being planned) with ALPHA. It's all good. But there's no substitute for the uncompromised message of Christ being spoken and lived out and made known (in a personal way) by those of us who claim the name of Christ.

And so, today, (in our story), the Lord calls out to us, just as he did to those first followers on the shores of Galilee. "How's the fishin'? How many have you caught? Is the net full?" Sometimes we have to answer, "No, Lord, it's been awful. I haven't caught a thing lately."

I don't want this to sound too easy. Catching people for the kingdom can be tough. Everyone doesn't respond to the bait, and many (somehow) seem to even elude the net. They stay far away, physically, psychologically, morally, spiritually, from where the net (of the church) makes its sweep. As many of you know, fishing can be a challenge. As Christians, it's the one great adventure we share.

What keeps people away? All kinds of things. Guilt from what they've done, fear of what might need to happen for it to work, a belief that it's not needed, a self-righteous approach that says it's all OK; personal circumstances, prejudices, you name it, it's a long list. There are countless reasons why people don't hear and (even when they do), why they refuse to believe.

Be that as it may, it doesn't change (for a moment) our task. Think of it as the sporting element. How dull would it be if you caught your limit every day in less than an hour? Maybe at first, but over time, it would lose its challenge.

I like to fish. I also like to golf. It's no different. Pars and birdies come hard. But that's why you keep playing. That's why you keep coming back. Let's not stop because it doesn't happen every time.

In this Easter season, we are reminded that Jesus is with us on every fishing trip we take. He's there, standing on the shore, encouraging us to try again, and promising that (when we do) the fish (that are there) will be caught.

And so, take him at his word. Take him up on his challenge and command. Be a part of the fishing crew that lets out the nets, day after day, year after year, time after time, until Jesus returns. It's why we're here. It's what the Christian life is all about. It's why we exist, in Christ.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for your calling to share in a work that you began long ago when you entered this world and that you completed when you gave your life on the cross and were raised from the dead. We thank you for the message we have to share and for the life (in that message) that is available for anyone willing to trust.

Lord, help us trust in your word and your promise that our fishing efforts are never in vain, but they are used by you to call and lead people to faith. Use us (collectively) as the Church, to cast your saving net into the world, and use us (individually) to cast that same net in the places we live and with the people we know that they might come to know you...in whose name we pray. Amen.