

Resurrection Living in the Kingdom of God

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John 21:1-14

Sermon Series: The
Kingdom of God

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Last Sunday was a glorious day—a real celebration of our Lord’s resurrection. Every year, I am overcome by the majesty and joy and wonder and truth of our Lord’s triumph over sin. It is just so good, so beautiful. Then comes Monday, and it’s back to life in the real world, living out our ordinary lives. Does the resurrection make a difference in our lives day today? Of course we know it should, but does it—really?

I have come to love the post-Easter accounts in the Gospels where Jesus appears to his disciples in his resurrected body. Associate pastors often become well-acquainted with these texts, because we get the privilege of preaching them year-after-year, as senior pastors usually take a much-needed break.

I have contemplated, for some time, what those first disciples might have felt and experienced those weeks after the resurrection. I do not believe we can fully comprehend the horror and devastation that the cross brought—not only to Jesus but also to those first followers. Their world was turned upside down as they lost their friend and leader to a brutal death. That had to have a tremendous impact on their psyches and their souls.

That despair was followed by the indescribable miracle of the resurrection. Again, we can only imagine what the disciples felt when they saw Jesus alive

again—disbelief, apprehension, fear, awe, wonder, joy, exuberance.

But here’s the thing I’ve been thinking about. The post-resurrection period was definitely a time of transition for the disciples. Even though Jesus was alive, he was still physically absent. He was no longer their constant companion in his human body as he had been for three years. And, while we understand the reasons for that, it was still a real loss to these disciples who had enjoyed the presence of Jesus. His friendship, his teaching, his ministry had been the center of their lives for many years. And things were now very different. The disciples had a huge adjustment in letting go of the incarnate Jesus and learning to live out the resurrection by the power of the Spirit. I can imagine the disciples wondering, perhaps even asking, “How is this going to be better for us? How is not having Jesus physically with us going to be better?”

Transitions are difficult. Even good transitions take energy, time, and patience, because they involve letting go of things in order to grab hold of something new. But transition is an ongoing part of life in this world. In fact, we could say life itself is a transition from our earthly birth until we are brought into the glorious presence of our Lord.

These post-resurrection appearances have a lot to say to us, whatever our experience. I know many in the congregation are going through transitions. Some are dealing with

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painful transitions of grief or illness. Others are between jobs or just starting new jobs. Still others are settling into married life, or life as a new parent or life as an empty-nester. Students may be anticipating moving on to a new school or even graduating. Young adults are in a long season of transition as they adjust from dependence on their parents—practical, financial, and emotional—to the independence and responsibilities of adult life.

I have a deeper appreciation of that as this week marks the one-year anniversary of our move to Vienna. The truth is, we really couldn't have done it without the help and support of so many—both here and there, as people helped us pack and unpack, load and unload, provided meals, took care of our kids, prayed for us, and on and on it goes. All of these gracious gifts supported and sustained us through a very tumultuous experience of letting go of the life we knew in Illinois and began our new life here.

I think the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were like that for the disciples. God not only gave these first disciples time, he also gave the wonderful gift of Jesus' appearing to them to support and sustain them during the transition period, and to remind them of the gracious gifts that would continue even after his ascension. The account of these resurrection appearances are gifts to us, too, as they reassure us—as it did them—that God gives resources to enable us to live a resurrection life in the midst of whatever life experiences we find ourselves in. In this passage, Jesus reminds his disciples of the gracious gifts that

he gives to his people—purpose, power, provision and presence.

Many have speculated as to why the disciples are out fishing. I think they are doing what they know how to do, and the truth is that they must still eat. They are fishing at night, which was not uncommon, but Jesus appears to them in the morning. Though they don't recognize Jesus, they heed the advice given, even though it is counter to what they know or normally do. They catch so many fish, they are in danger of sinking. John is the first to recognize Jesus, but, as usual, Peter is the first to act.

The incident reminds them again of their purpose, as it recalls an earlier fishing experience. At that time, he also told them to let down their nets. The number of fish was so great the nets did break. Then, Jesus said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Their purpose is to reach people with the good news. They are now to join God in drawing people to Jesus. Jesus' work becomes the disciples' work. The fact that the net does not break this time may suggest that the gospel net will never break—that there is no limit to the number of people that can be drawn in by the good news.

The passage also highlights that this event is yet another expression of Christ's power. They have seen Jesus do so many things—walking on water, feeding the multitudes with two fish and five loaves of bread, healing the sick, casting out demons and raising people from the dead. But it is a gift to them to see the resurrected Jesus doing miracles again because, undoubtedly, the disciples have come to the end of themselves.

This joyous story in the Gospel of John testifies to the truth that Jesus' gifts continue even after the events of his death and resurrection. The huge catch and the gracious meal of bread and fish show that God's gifts are available in the risen Jesus just as they were in the incarnate Jesus.

Their failed fishing expedition may well have reinforced what they were meant to learn from Jesus all along—that apart from him they can do nothing. They are aware of their deep need, inadequacy and powerlessness, even to catch some fish to eat. They have suffered grief, shame, humiliation and defeat. But Christ comes to them in power and demonstrates again that he can do for them what they cannot do for themselves. And, not only is he able to do it, he is very willing.

This passage also demonstrates Jesus' provision as he gives the catch for the day. But even before they can pull it in and prepare something to eat, Jesus is serving them as he meets their tiredness after a night of toil with a hot breakfast. Just as he had served them in his life, he continues now, after his resurrection, to meet their physical needs. Jesus is eager and willing to provide for his people. Jesus' preparation of this meal for his disciples confirms that he is the giver of gifts, the source of life-sustaining nourishment.

Perhaps the greatest gift that Jesus offers is the gift of himself in his presence. I love these lines: "None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord." It indicates, I think, that they knew but could hardly believe it was really true. Jesus was alive and with them—sitting right in front of them. It must have brought the disciples such comfort to have Jesus with them again and to be reassured of his promise to be with them—to know that he would continue to demonstrate his power and provide for them.

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Jesus' gifts continue even after the events of his death and resurrection. The huge catch and the gracious meal of bread and fish show that God's gifts are available in the risen Jesus just as they were in the incarnate Jesus. The fellowship of the meal confirms the intimacy of the relationship between the risen Lord and his disciples. Their life and ministry is to be grounded in an experience of God's fullness and unprecedented, unexpected gifts. Their purpose is to live an abundant life, resulting in a fruitful ministry as they rely on Christ's continued gifts of power, provision and presence in their lives.

This account, in verses 1-14, provides the backdrop for the call to discipleship that Peter receives in the next section. It is a reiteration of the purpose, because the gifts of grace are not given so we can merely hold on to them and enjoy them. Jesus' gifts in his miracles are only signs of his ultimate gift—the gift of his life in love—and Jesus calls Peter and us to share in that gift. To know Jesus is to love Jesus. And to love Jesus is to shape one's life according to Jesus' life. Three times, Peter denied Jesus. So three times, Jesus asks him, "Do you love me." Three times, Peter answers, "Yes." To each of these answers, Jesus responded by calling Peter to feed his sheep, underscoring that words of love must be matched by a life of love. It is not what we say but what we do that matters most. And what we are to do is feed Jesus' sheep. Peter's love, and our love, will be evidenced when we care for Christ's flock, not apart from that care.

Jesus goes on to tell Peter, "Follow me," extending an invitation to discipleship. At the Last Supper, Peter boasted in front of

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the others, “Even if all falls away, I will not... Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” At the time, Jesus rejected that claim. But verses 18-19 show that now Peter is able to do what he could not do before; he will lay down his life in love. By the time his gospel was written, he already had.

The life to which Jesus summons Peter requires of him an act of love that matches Jesus’ act: The gift of his life. Peter models for us the ultimate faithfulness to Jesus’ words, because he fulfills Jesus’ core commandment, that his disciples love one another as he has loved them.

Peter is a great example and encouragement to me. He is so human. The gospels are faithful to record his impulsive nature, his denials and his boastful actions. But something dramatic happens to Peter to make him able to do what he could not do before. I believe that finally Peter was brought to the end of himself. Finally, he realized how weak he was but that Christ’s power would make him strong. Finally, he realized how sinful he was but Christ forgives. Finally, he realized how wounded he was but Christ heals. It is because of his weakness and woundedness that Peter becomes such a great servant for Christ. He is finally able to deny himself and let go of his own human striving and trust in the gift of grace that Jesus gives and the power of the Spirit to work through him to do what only God can do. And, so, Peter is able to remain faithful, to feed his sheep and to follow Christ, even to death. All of the disciples turned their world upside down, because the resurrection was real. The power

of the Spirit was real and alive in their lives, and they stepped boldly to proclaim that good news to the whole world.

Relatively few Christians are called to the life of martyrdom, but let us be perfectly clear: All of us are called to give our lives to Jesus and to work for the expansion of God’s kingdom. We’re all called to feed Jesus’ sheep. We’re called to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.

Emmy Parker and the whole friendship class are wonderful witnesses of how they have done for each other. And I would ask each of you to ask yourselves: What does Jesus’ call to “feed my sheep” and to “follow me” look like in my life? Who are the sheep Jesus has called me to love and care for in his name? Are you relying on the gifts of grace to do that?

Let us step out boldly to live out the purpose God has given us—to love the Lord and love the people, to serve the Lord and serve the people—trusting in the gracious gifts of the risen Christ!

