



Resurrection Gifts

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John 21:1-14

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During this Eastertide season, we are exploring the resurrection texts found at the end of the Gospels. Today's text is one of my favorites. These words have encouraged me through many transitions in my life including graduating from college to begin ministry, leaving the US to go on a mission to Russia, getting married, going through seminary to become a pastor, walking through infertility, and then the process of adoption to become a parent moving from Chicago to Vienna 14 years ago. Even now, this passage is speaking to me in the midst of so much transition in our world and in our church.

The passage reminds us that the disciples are in a significant time of transition. Even though the resurrection appearances made clear that Jesus was alive, everything was different. Jesus wasn't with them all the time as he had been, which was a real loss as they had enjoyed his presence, friendship, and leadership for three years.

Transition takes time. God was good to give 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension to help the disciples adjust to not having Jesus physically with them. Though he appears a number of times, he is quickly gone again. The disciples have to learn to let go of the incarnate Jesus in order to receive the resurrection gifts that will continue through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus had told them that he would return to the Father and they would be filled with grief. But he assured them, “It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you” (John 16:7). In this time of transition after the resurrection before Pentecost, 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?”

Transition is difficult. Even good transitions are hard because every change involves loss, even good change. Getting married and getting divorced involve the same amount of loss. Losing a job and getting a new one both involve loss. Grieving the death of a loved one and having a baby both involve loss. Even though this transition will ultimately be better for Jesus’ followers, it is still hard.

The truth is, transition is an ongoing part of life in this world. We could say life itself is a transition between our first letting go of the womb to be born into this world to our final letting go in death as we are ushered into the glorious presence of our Lord. So this passage speaks to us whatever our personal experience, and it certainly speaks to all of us as we transition out of COVID and prepare for a new senior leader.

Resurrection Gifts: In this time of transition, Jesus wants his followers to know that it’s not just forgiveness of sin and

eternal life he gives. Jesus gives resurrection gifts so we can live a new and different kind of life right here, right now, whatever our experience. Our passage today reveals four resurrection gifts: purpose, power, provision, and presence.

The disciples are in Galilee, and some of them decide to go fishing. We don't know why, but it's what they know how to do, and they have to eat. Night is the best time to catch fish, but their nets are empty. In the morning, Jesus appears, calling from the shore, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" No fisherman wants to hear a question like that. Their response is one word. "No" (John 21:5). They caught nothing. Zip.

I can't help but think this failed fishing expedition may well have made them even more aware of their deep need, inadequacy, and powerlessness. They can't even do what they know how to do in catching some fish to eat. Remember they have suffered grief, shame, humiliation, and defeat. So Jesus' question and their answer brings to mind Jesus' words, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). That's a lesson they, and every follower of Jesus, need to learn.

So Jesus tells them to do something different: "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some" (John 21:6). While they don't yet recognize Jesus, they do

listen, trust, and obey his word. And they catch so many fish the boat is in danger of sinking.

The incident reveals the first resurrection gift in reminding them again of their *purpose*. Early in his ministry, Jesus borrowed Peter's boat to preach and then told him to let down their nets. The number of fish was so great that the boat began to sink. Peter's response then was to say, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). But Jesus said, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (Luke 5:10). But in this passage, Peter's response is completely different. He jumps into the water trying to get as close to Jesus as possible as fast as he can.

In his new book *Hope in Times of Fear*, Tim Keller writes, "Jesus claimed to be the Lord God of the universe, who had come to earth to give himself for us so that we could live for him. That is a call of total allegiance. You will have to either run away screaming in anger or fear or to run toward him with joy and love and fall down at his feet and say, 'I am yours.' Nothing in the middle makes any sense. Unless you are running away from him or running toward him, you actually don't know who he is. Peter has done both." This passage makes clear that Peter now knows enough about the gospel of grace to realize he has nothing to fear from Jesus.

Friends, we are called to a wholehearted commitment to Christ and his purpose. Earlier in the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “When I am lifted up from earth, I will *draw* all people to myself” (John 12:32). This same verb is used to describe the disciples’ action of drawing the net full of fish out of the water. Catching fish was the disciples’ vocation, but they have been given a new calling, a new purpose, a new commitment to Christ’s ongoing work in the world by drawing people to Jesus. The fact that the net full of fish doesn’t break may suggest that the gospel net will never break. There is no limit to the number of people Jesus longs to catch.

This incredible catch of fish not only points to the resurrection gift of a renewed purpose but also *power*. Undoubtedly this experience brought to mind other miracles they witnessed revealing Jesus’ power. They saw Jesus walk on water, feed 5,000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread, heal the sick, cast out demons, and even raise people from the dead. It must have been reassuring to see Jesus’ power still doing for them what they could not do for themselves.

This has been a very disorienting year for all of us dealing with COVID isolation and learning to work and study from home. On top of that, there are other personal and professional challenges each of us has faced. For me, that has included dealing with my husband’s ongoing brain

cancer diagnosis and treatment, and dealing with my mother's transition to hospice and a new home in a new city. It has been a time of feeling out of control, but as I have said to several people, it's in times like these that we know whether we really believe and are living the truth of God's word.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). I don't deny that my present circumstances are stressful, but my family and I have seen God's power at work through medical staff, answered prayers, and the love and support of so many. I know—not just intellectually but from experience—that Jesus' resurrection power is available to help us in our lives in every circumstance we find ourselves.

So Jesus' resurrection gifts include purpose, power, and also *provision*. Jesus not only gives them the catch for the day but actually prepares a hot breakfast for them to eat after a night of toil.

Just as he had served his followers in his life, Jesus continues to meet their physical needs. Hear me now: Jesus is eager and willing to provide life-sustaining nourishment for his people.

As the disciples are sitting and eating with Jesus again, they must have remembered the many meals they shared with Jesus as he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it for many to eat and be satisfied.

Undoubtedly, the Last Supper would come to mind when Jesus said, “This is my body, broken for you” (1 Corinthians 11:24). Having been through the experiences of the cross and resurrection, they now have a new lens for understanding what they didn’t understand before: Jesus is the Bread of Life, the One whose body was broken for the sins of the many. Jesus is the single loaf from which all the needs of the world will be met. Jesus is faithful to provide what we need. This is good news. Jesus has done everything necessary to save us and will continue to provide all that is needed as we follow him in life, whatever our circumstances. And he will provide what we need as we participate in his ongoing work in the world.

This year I have seen Jesus provide in so many ways as we have had to listen to the Lord and do things differently. I’m so thankful for our staff who pivoted so quickly to enable ministry to continue online. It’s not what any of us would have wanted, but Jesus provided so that we could stay connected. We have learned new skills and new ways of doing things. It’s been hard in many ways, but I thank God for how He has provided for our church and churches around

the world to help position us to reach and catch more people for Christ.

This year has also brought racial injustice to the forefront in painful ways, but again I see how the Lord has provided time and space in this COVID experience for reading, reflecting, and building bridges across racial divides. Many of us have grown in awareness and understanding of injustice. Our new Ministry of Racial Reconciliation and Healing was born out of this *Kairos* moment to help us better live into our purpose of being true ministers of reconciliation.

Finally, we are still in the middle of one of the biggest applications of this passage for our church. Our pastoral nominating committee has been working hard to discern God's choice of a new senior pastor. And next Sunday, we have the joy of meeting that person.

There will be many ways we have to listen to the Lord and heed His invitation to do things differently under the leadership of a new pastor. But again I am hopeful and confident that this new era of ministry can be a time that God will continue to provide for us and position us to catch even more people for His glory.

Perhaps the greatest resurrection gift that Jesus offers in this passage is simply the gift of himself in his *presence*. I

love this line: “None of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord” (John 21:12). That phrase is repeated three times in this passage. “It is the Lord.” It must have brought the disciples such comfort and joy to see Jesus alive and to have him sitting with them and sharing a meal with them again. This gave them hope and confidence in his promise that he would continue to be with them.

This joyous story in the Gospel of John assures us that Jesus’ resurrection gifts are available to us individually and collectively right here, right now, whatever our experience. We have everything we need to live an abundant life and to bear much fruit as we trust the Risen Christ to live out our purpose, to receive and rely on the resurrection gifts he continues to give through the presence, power, and provision of the Holy Spirit.

So what? What difference does this make? I have four questions for you based on Jesus’ words to the disciples.

First, Jesus essentially asks the disciples, “How are you doing?” I encourage you to take time to assess your life by asking yourself that question: How are you doing, really? Are you experiencing the resurrection gifts, even in the midst of the hassles and headaches and sometimes-humdrum experiences you are having? Or are you coming up empty? Are you learning that apart from Jesus you can do nothing?

Each week we are lifting up the importance of reading God's word, praying, spending time with spiritual friends, and participating in a learning community or Bible study. It's not about trying harder or doing more. It's about trusting as we learn to abide in Christ or remain connected to Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, how's it going, really? Be honest with yourself and God.

Second, given your assessment, is Jesus inviting you to do something different? Each season of life brings invitations to listen to Jesus and be willing to cast your net to the other side of the boat and do something different. Some may need to be more intentional with spiritual practices. Others may be in a season of transition due to a broken relationship, grief, or illness, or even good things like a new marriage or new baby. Again, our care ministries are available as a means of grace to help you receive and live into the resurrection gifts Jesus has already given.

I know the value of that personally. In the fall I took the initiative to put in place some additional support that I might need in light of my husband's cancer diagnosis and the upcoming church transition with Pete's departure. Wisdom is knowing our limits and heeding Jesus' invitation to do something different to receive and live into the resurrection gifts Jesus has already provided.

Third, Jesus says to the disciples, “Bring some of the fish you caught!” (John 21:10) In essence he’s saying, “I’d like to use what you have!” Are you willing to bring what you have and let Jesus use it for his glory and the expansion of the gospel? Jesus wants to use your unique SHAPE (Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, and Experience) to love and serve the Lord and the people. Jesus wants to use your mouth to speak up and share the good news and to bear witness to the difference he has made in our lives. Jesus wants to use your hands, feet, and time to care for the needs of others. Jesus wants to give you courage so you can dare to stand up for truth and justice in the face of evil. Jesus wants to use the money and resources he has given you to bless others and advance his kingdom in the world.

Jesus is the giver of all good things. But *we* choose to bring what he has given, or we do not. We choose whether we will let him use us for his glory, the good of others, and the advancement of his kingdom.

Finally, Jesus says to the disciples, “...Come and have breakfast...” (John 21:12). In other words, “Let’s have a meal together.” This may be the hardest of all because it relates to time and priorities. Jesus always had time for people, and he shared many meals with others. For some mysterious reason, people most freely talk with and get to know one another around a table. It has been suggested that

Jesus' number one means of mission and discipleship in the world was having meals with people.

We have been very isolated this past year. But as things begin to open up, we have the opportunity to evaluate how we spend and use our time in relationship to people. Jesus longs to spend time with us, and he longs for us to spend time with others—so share a meal.

This passage has special significance for me right now as I have been serving in the role of interim head of staff for two months. I have been aware that we as a congregation need to let go of doing some of the things we have been doing or know to do in order to listen to the Lord and heed His call to do something different. To that end, the session and I can see even more clearly how much work is still needed to really get our congregation ready to receive a new pastor and ensure a solid beginning.

We agree that there is value in bringing in outside voices that can help us listen to the Lord in new ways and gain new perspective and prepare us for a hopeful future with a new pastor and our post-COVID mission opportunities. We need another set of eyes to come in to do what is needed.

To facilitate that happening, the session and I agreed that it would be best for the congregation for me to take an administrative leave, which is expected to be for three

months. The best thing I can do at this time to love and serve the Lord and the people of VPC is to let go and let God. I will feel grief in not being present in this critical juncture in the life of the congregation. But I do understand the wisdom of it and truly believe the benefits for us as a congregation will be great.

And I do receive this administrative leave as a gift and sign of God's providential care in freeing me to better attend to the needs of my family, given my husband Stuart's ongoing struggle with cancer. In addition, it provides time and space for me to listen to the Lord in new ways as I give time to some much-needed study leave and other ministry tasks that I never have time to attend to in the course of everyday ministry, especially in the last year. I hope this will help me personally become better equipped to serve in this new season of ministry at VPC.

Though this new transition model is different than I or any of us had planned, I am confident that our Triune God is leading us into the hopeful future and greater ministry God has sovereignly prepared for us.

Our passage speaks to me and I hope to you, too. I believe with all my heart that Jesus is the risen Lord and head of the church, and the Spirit is with us, working in and through and for us in ways we see and don't see. I believe Jesus' resurrection gifts of power, provision, and presence

are available right now to help us better live out our purpose of becoming like Christ together for the world. We have everything we need to follow Jesus into a new era of life and ministry.