

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Third Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2022

(John 21:1-19)

At the outset, let me say that I view chapter 21 of John's Gospel as something of an oddity.

Many Biblical scholars think that despite being attached to some of the earliest existing manuscripts it wasn't even part of the original gospel, having been added on later by someone writing in the Johannine "style" of the original author. When looking at it in the context of the entire book, it's possible to discern the very awkward "feel" of it.

Consider this, for instance. Chapter 20 ends with these two verses: "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."¹ In the overall flow of the narrative, it sounds like the author is essentially saying "The End." *I have told you everything I need to say; the rest is up to you ... through your reflection, faith and belief.*

The problem is that now, with chapter 21, we do *not* have "The End." We instead have what amounts to a gospel postscript. For me it's as if I'm watching an advertisement on television and reach the moment when the presenter seems to be done, only for them to follow up with "But wait, there's more!"

Despite the awkward nature of this being tacked on at the end of the gospel, this chapter contains some marvelous imagery ... and, admittedly, some things to cause a bit of head scratching. For instance, it's just after daybreak. Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John and two other unnamed disciples have been out on the water fishing all night. They hadn't caught *anything*. And then they catch sight of Jesus standing on the shore ... "But the disciples did not know it was Jesus."²

They did not know it was Jesus. How is this possible? It certainly does point to the idea that this chapter was indeed an add-on. This was the man with whom they had traveled and spent nearly every hour with for *three years*. Very recently – in relation to the events in this chapter – this was the man who had just appeared in their midst following his resurrection, and again a week later when Thomas could be with them and see ... and *believe* ... for himself. This was the man they had come to know better than they knew themselves ... and yet here, *they did not know it was Jesus.*

¹ John 20:30-31 (NRSV).

² John 21:4 (NRSV).

Some consider the lack of recognition a realistic reaction given that it was early in the morning and they were out on a boat away from the shore.³ What's most remarkable here, however, is that, in an echo of the Easter morning narrative in John, it is the disciple whom Jesus loved (the one typically referred to as the Beloved Disciple) who recognized him after their nets were miraculously filled. (Remember, it was while at the tomb on that resurrection morning that this same disciple was first ... first to arrive at the tomb after outracing Peter, and the first to look through the opening and see Jesus wasn't there.)

I have to pause here and say that, as often as I have mentioned the impetuosity of Peter and the haste he often displays in responding to the events around him, his action today is remarkable. Like the other six, he doesn't recognize Jesus on the shore ... but when this unnamed disciple announces to Peter "It is the Lord!"⁴ he throws on his clothes and proceeds to jump into the lake, once again guided by his heart and emotions and desire to stand on the shore with him.

I can't help but think of the scene from "Forrest Gump" when Forrest – who also is out on the water – sees his former Vietnam commanding officer, Lt. Dan, sitting on the dock. In his excitement, he does not steer the boat into shore; he simply runs and jumps ... waving ... into the water and swims to the dock to greet his friend ... guided by his heart and emotions and desire to stand with him on the dock.

So as an outgrowth of both of these – the lack of recognition and then the unrestrained joy when he *is* known – I have been wondering about two things. First, how often do we look at someone and, like the disciples on the boat, *not recognize* the face of Jesus in them? It's easy to see Jesus in the faces of friends, family members and loved ones. What's not as easy is seeing Jesus in the faces of those with whom we disagree ... those whose ideas run counter to ours ... those whose faith may run counter to ours. And second, when we *do* see the face of Jesus in someone else ... friend and foe alike ... do we find ourselves responding with the same unrestrained joy as Peter?

They are not easy questions to answer ... and they are particularly difficult to answer *if* we are *honest* about the answers we give. I admit it is a struggle for me, and that the answers to those questions ... "How often do we not recognize the face of Jesus" and "When we do see the face of Jesus do we respond with the same unrestrained joy as Peter" – are "more often than I would like" and "not as often as I would like."

So this morning, I'm once again challenging *myself* and offering a challenge to *you*, the challenge to combine the vision of the Beloved Disciple with the unrestrained joy of Peter. Whether it's at a distance from the proverbial shore or seated in the brightness of the fire, look for the face of Jesus in others ... *all* others. But don't simply look with

³ Raymond Brown. *The Gospel According to John: XIII-XXI*, p. 1070.

⁴ John 21:7 (NRSV).

your *eyes*; look with your *hearts*. Your *eyes* will reveal the surface; your *hearts* will reveal the Lord.

And when you hear that inner voice ... the voice of the Holy Spirit ... say to you "It is the Lord!" then run ... and shout ... and *rejoice*!

Amen.