



Launch Out:
“DID YOU NOTICE THE FISH?”

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Scripture: John 21:1-14

The Scripture Reading

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.

That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God!

The Crucial Times of Life

We are four weeks into our sermon series called “Launch Out!” We have launched out into the biblical stories and parables of the Bible that locate Jesus and the disciples around bodies of water. From our kayak in the sanctuary, we are reminded that we’ve launched out into some biblical passages that have taken us away from the shoreline and into the water.

This morning we “Launch Out” into the water at the Sea of Tiberias. There at the sea, we meet seven of the disciples: Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two other unnamed disciples. Judas is no longer with the disciples, and four others decided not to tag along. There at the sea, Peter takes the lead and announces that he’s going fishing. Remember, prior to following Jesus for three years in ministry, their band of disciples primarily consisted of fisherman. Certainly James and John, as well as Peter and Andrew were fisherman. We know that, from their call to join Jesus at the shoreline of Galilee as they dropped their nets, left their father, and obediently followed.

So here we are, at the Sea of Tiberias. Peter takes the lead to get back to the normal routines of life by going fishing. This is a post-Easter resurrection story, so they are probably craving something familiar and certain. For this group, fishing would be familiar and certain. They know fishing, they know the seashore, they know the comfort and peace that fishing can bring. So this small band of disciples hit the sea with nets in hand, hop into the boat, and begin an evening of watching the waters for fish.

In the post-Easter resurrection context, they’ve journeyed with Jesus through the last week of his life. They broke bread and shared the cup with him at the Last Supper in the Upper Room. They were there in the Garden of Gethsemane. They watched as he took his last breath on the cross. Then, in the morning hours they heard the report from Mary Magdalene that Jesus had raised from the dead. They learned from Mary Magdalene that she encountered Jesus at the tomb. Not a gardener at the tomb, but Jesus the Christ.

Following the report from the tomb, this group of disciples then encountered Jesus as they hid in the Upper Room for fear of the crowds. All of the disciples except Judas and Thomas met Jesus in the Upper Room. They touched his hands and received the commission to continue the ministry in his name.

Then, a second time, Jesus came to the disciples, only this time Thomas was present. Doubting Thomas discovered his belief as he touched Jesus’ hands and side.

The third time the disciples would encounter Jesus following his resurrection was at the Sea of Tiberias, after a night of unsuccessful fishing.

So here we are. The disciples are probably craving something familiar and certain after all of the uncertain events leading up to Jesus’ death and resurrection. So they find themselves fishing for the night.

At daybreak, they peer onto the shore and hear someone hollering at them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” Perhaps it’s another fisherman. Perhaps it’s a townsman. They can’t really identify who this person is. This unidentified person not only asks how the fishing is coming, he also gives a suggestion when the fishing report turns out to be a dud. “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” The disciples do. And guess what! The fish are ripe for catching! Duh! The other side of the boat! Why hadn’t they tried that earlier?!

It isn’t long until the disciples discover that their unidentified person is Jesus. Celebration rings out, cannon balls into the sea take place, and a race to the seashore to meet Jesus wraps up the morning of fishing. Next comes breakfast on the beach. What’s cookin’? Bread and fresh fish.

I find this post-Easter story comforting, especially after all of the events from Holy Week. It’s the last story of Jesus and his disciples in John’s Gospel. The story of the resurrection doesn’t conclude John’s book. The story of Jesus meeting the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias and having breakfast on the beach concludes John’s Gospel.

This story is comforting because Jesus keeps appearing to the disciples at crucial times in their lives.

- Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene in her *grief* at the tomb.
- Jesus appears to the disciples in their *fear* in the Upper Room.
- Jesus returns to the Upper Room and appears to the disciples in their *doubt*.
- Then Jesus appears to the disciples in their *daily life* as they fish at the Sea of Tiberias.

In times of *grief, fear, doubt, and daily life*, Jesus keeps showing up for the disciples.

I love that! That’s what makes the post-Easter stories of Jesus so powerful! Just when we thought that Jesus had been crucified and died, we learn that he has resurrected. And he keeps appearing in the lives of his disciples, in their great times of need—through *grief, fear, and doubt*—and in their *daily living* of fishing.

I love this passage.

But there’s more for us to learn. Yes, Jesus shows up for the disciples during critical times of their lives. And yes, we know that Jesus is there for us in critical moments of our life, too:

- the moments when a cancer diagnosis is given
- the moments when a teenage child faces an eating disorder
- the moments when a marriage struggles
- the moments when finances become a burden
- the moments when getting out of bed is just too difficult
- and moments when a loved one passes from our hands into the hands of God

In all of those moments, we know that Jesus is there for us, just like he was for the disciples, in the critical moments of their life.

But there's more for us to learn from this passage than knowing Jesus shows up for us. Of course we know that Jesus is always there for us! Of course we know that God is our constant source of comfort, strength, peace, guidance, hope, joy, and light in the world. We know that! Or I hope you know that! Most pastors preach it!

But there's more for us to learn.

Too Busy To Notice

In verse 6, Jesus tells the disciples to cast their nets to the right side of the boat. There they find fish. Duh! Why hadn't they tried the other side of the boat before?! They weren't catching any fish on the left side. So why did it take someone from the shoreline to holler at them before they tried the right side of the boat—the other side of the boat?

I've come to realize that the disciples must have been distracted.

Distracted by the recent events in the life of Jesus' ministry. They were so distracted that they couldn't even put two and two together to try lugging their nets to the other side of the boat to try the fishing there.

The disciples must have been distracted.

These were expert fishermen in their trade. They made a living by fishing. Sure, they were probably a little rusty after following Jesus for three years of ministry. But they were experts in their field. Yet it took another person to point out the obvious: try the other side of the boat! They must have been too distracted to notice the obvious.

I think much of society has become distracted.

I think it's a sign that we're doing too much. Too stressed out. Too much to balance.

We are a culture addicted to busyness. We are a culture that measures our personal self-worth by how busy we are, the number of activities in which we are engaged, and the number of hours that we put in at the office. Hello! Newsflash! You are a beautiful child of God! You don't gain personal self-worth by how much running around you do, or by the 70 hour work weeks in the office! I say that kindly, but clearly, because it's true and an important reminder to hear. I need to hear it myself.

If you're like me, your life is filled with activity. Friends, family, church, work—these are all things that fill our lives with activity. But is too much activity healthy? Is living a busy life healthy? I ask this, because I've discovered the busier and fuller my schedule becomes, the more distracted I get. And with distraction comes forgetfulness. Perhaps it's forgetting where I placed my keys or where I left my coffee cup. Or maybe it's forgetting if I sent the email I intended.

Can you relate? Do you get too busy, living such a full schedule that you get easily distracted, too?

I see myself in the disciples. Do you see yourself in the band of disciples? Too distracted to notice the fish just on the other side of the boat? Sometimes we have so much going on that we get easily distracted and we can't see clearly. Can you relate?

In college I was a Communication and Theatre major. I remember stopping in my advisor's office my junior or senior year, plopping on her couch, and pouring out my heart. She was a wonderful professor. In her late thirties. Deep faith. Wise beyond her years. As I sat on her couch, I confessed that I didn't have a clue as to what I was going to do with my life upon graduation. Like any junior or senior that begins seeing graduation in sight, we all begin to panic. So in an exhausted panic in her office, I sat there, verbally pouring out every worry and concern, while at the same time, explaining how exhausted I was from theatre rehearsals, classes, internships, and the general rush of activities that college brings forth.

Her response was brilliant. "Have you taken time to stare at a wall, Lindsey?"

"What? What are you taking about?"

"Have you taken time lately, to sit still, breathe deeply, and just stare at a wall?"

You have no idea how absurd that sounded to me in the moment. I was anxiety ridden about what I would do with my life upon graduation. And I was exhausted from theatre rehearsals, internships, and classes. And now I was being asked if I had stared at a wall recently? Really?

At the moment, her question rang through my ears like foolishness. But I can't tell you how many times I've thought about her question over the past 10 years since our time together that afternoon. So I ask you. "Have you taken time to stare at a wall?"

Follow me. Have you taken time to slow down, breathe deeply, and just be? If you're like me, you don't do it often enough.

The thing is, we shouldn't just slow down so we can remember where we put our car keys and coffee cups. We shouldn't just slow down so we can remember if we packed the kids' lunches or where we left our reading glasses. We need to slow down to spend time with God.

Sometimes we even get so distracted that we forget to spend some quiet moments with God—moments that allow us to be still, rest in God's presence, nurture our spirit, and just look out a window and enjoy a beautiful snowfall for a few minutes. Or as my college professor says, stare at the wall.

It's difficult to do it in the rush of daily activities and things to check off our to-do lists. But it's crucial! If we don't slow down, it's dangerous. If we don't make time for God, we're missing something important in our life. We've got to take time to be still. To notice God's presence in our life. And like the disciples, notice that there's fish on the other side of the boat, for heaven's sake!

If Jesus keeps showing up in our life, especially in the crucial moments, but we're too busy and distracted to notice, what good is that?

Beginning to Notice

Have you been to the boundary waters before? Are there any campers and canoe trip lovers among us?

In college I worked at a United Methodist summer camp in Minnesota. Canoe trips were part of the weekly routine. Training for the summer began with a canoe trip for the counselors. I was pumped for the first canoe trip I took to the boundary waters. Open water and endless places to play in the sun. Our trip guide got us settled in our canoes, but before we could "Launch Out" into the water, he made us paddle out into the water 20 or 30 feet and just sit there, quietly, for 10 minutes. Our job was to notice the beauty and experience God in nature. I'll admit that I rolled my eyes and impatiently began the task. But several minutes in, I understood why he had us do that. Breathing deeply, taking in the fresh air, and observing the glorious sight of the water and blue sky made me keenly aware of God's presence and the heavenly beauty. I had to slow down to notice God's presence. If I hadn't slowed down, I would have been too distracted to get the adventure started that I might have missed God's presence with me.

Slowing down makes us less distracted, and more focused on God.

I know I'm getting long winded, so I'll wrap this message up. Every preacher has a challenge. So now for the challenge from the preacher...

My challenge for you this week is twofold. First, slow down and notice God's beauty around you. Notice the fish on the other side of the boat. And second, reflect upon what you need in order to become less distracted and more aware of God and God at work in your life.

Friends, we've got to wake up from our slumber of distraction. We've got to notice the fish on the other side of the boat. It's time we "Launch Out" from the things that keep us so distracted, and start noticing the beauty of God around us, the activity of God in our life. Jesus is calling us on the shoreline slow down. It's hard to do. But with practice, I believe we can do it!

Thanks be to God for God's amazing grace that guides us, directs us, and always helps us see the fish on the other side of the boat. Amen.