

## SPG#128, EASTER 3C

April 22, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 9:1-19a

Rev. 5:6-14

John 21:1-14

The gospel of John in today's gospel reading records the third so called post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. Now we might suppose that a post resurrection appearance would be an occurrence of some magnitude. We might suppose that the figure of Jesus who had risen from the dead, might be a shining figure like in the Transfiguration. Or we might suppose that he would work some astonishing miracle such as when he fed 5,000 people with some loaves of bread and fish. But such is not the case in this post resurrection appearance. Nor is it the case in the other post resurrection appearances.

Instead, the writer of the gospel of John, supposedly the apostle John, provides us with a sequence of descriptions and events that are designed to enhance our reflection.

In the story Peter and several of the disciples have decided to go fishing in the Sea of Galilee. They fish all night, but catch nothing. At about daybreak Jesus appears on the beach while the disciples are about a hundred yards offshore in the boat. Jesus calls to them, and in the exchange it is established that they have caught no fish. At this point the disciples do not recognize him. Jesus instructs them to cast the net on the other side of the boat. They do so and catch so many fish that they are scarcely able to pull them in.

The nets bursting with fish might remind us that we had a similar story on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany. In that story from the gospel of Luke, Jesus is teaching the people on the shore near Capernaum, while he stands in a boat out from the shore. In that account he has the disciples put out into deeper water where they pull up a multitude of fish.

But in today's story as the disciples are pulling up the multitude of fish, they notice a figure, standing on the beach. Then they saw that it was Jesus. The "disciple that Jesus loved," supposedly

the apostle John, says, "It is the Lord." Peter then puts clothes on, as he was naked. He swam to the shore, while the other disciples came in the boat dragging the net full of fish.

As they began to gather around Jesus on the beach, they notice a fire upon which there are some fish cooking. Today's gospel says that no one dared ask who he was because they all knew who he was. Jesus then took the fish off the fire and gave some to the disciples along with some bread.

And so we are left with a series of images about which there is no comment, the risen Jesus standing on the beach, the nets bursting with fish, and Peter who had no clothes on.

And the implied questions about the identity of Jesus and the disciples response to him are not referred to. This type of provocative writing is typical of the writing of the fourth gospel. Today's story is a great example of that. The image of the risen Jesus, the nets bursting with fish, the naked Peter, and the disciples' recognition of Jesus all beg to be described.

Because it is the word of God, and because of the way it is written, the story is timeless. It is possible to read the story once, twice, and more, all the while gaining in one's ability to reflect on it. It is a very provocative story. And it definitely is designed to stir up the reader. The nets bursting with fish on one side of the boat, after the disciples had caught nothing on the other side, is an image in and of itself. But it is only an introduction. Then the writer lets us know that all this time Peter has been naked. It is conceivable, since they had been fishing all night. And first century fishermen allowed for nakedness in the dark.

William Barclay in his commentary on the gospel of John shares his opinion that, far from being a miracle, the throwing of the net on one side of the boat, and the instructions from Jesus on the shore to throw on the other side, was commonplace in first century fishing. Often he says persons on the shore would serve as spotters. The person on shore was in a position to see schools of fish in the clear water better than people who were nearer the water. So often, Barclay says, the spotter would

look at the boat, and the water around the boat. Then the spotter would give directions on where the net should be cast depending on what was observed.

And so, in the fishing account, the writer invites us on a sensory journey. But again all of that is just a preparation. For Jesus, the risen Lord, is standing on the shore. He had been killed, hung on a cross to die. But now, he stood on the beach, alive, resurrected, waiting to be recognized.

The writer says that the disciple whom Jesus loved, the apostle John, said, “It is the Lord.” Recognition had occurred. As they gathered around him on the beach, the sensory journey continued. With the wind blowing, and waves hitting the beach, Jesus is cooking fish on a fire.

They had heard him call to them from shore, had felt the wind, the water, had seen the bursting net, had smelled fresh caught fish, had seen Peter put on clothes, jump in the water, and swim to shore, had smelled the fire cooking fish. And when they drew near, he gave them the fish and some bread to eat. He gave them something to eat. In the story there are things to hear, things to see, things to smell, things to feel on your skin, and things to taste. He gave them something to eat.

That is the end of the story of post-resurrection appearance No. three. And in looking back on it, we need to remember that these New Testament stories are stories that were produced and told in the early church. I think that such a story as the one we have today was told many times in worship settings before it appeared as part of the gospel of John. And so what we see is a story written down as a story that has been told many times in liturgical settings. And I would even go so far as to say that this story, before it became part of the gospel of John, had been told in eucharistic liturgical settings with communion present. But, when we stop and think about it, often in the New Testament when a story includes the figure of Jesus, the events around Jesus have a certain liturgical rhythm, as though the story had been told in other liturgies.

This interpretation would also help in understanding why there are different “versions” of the same story such as our story today. Further, you might notice that all the descriptions of the story have to do with the disciples, fish, nature etc. There is no extensive description of Jesus other than the fact that he was there. There is a lifting up of the setting of the story as being of importance.

In fact, I discern three points of prominence within the story: Jesus himself, the natural setting, and the disciples themselves.

When you reflect on those three points of prominence, as told in a liturgical setting, you can easily see the connecting points between that first century meal on the beach and our own Eucharist.

The points of prominence in our story are: Jesus himself, the setting of our own church here in Grinnell, and us ourselves. In our lives we are working jobs, going to school, and parenting. Some of us are in retirement mode. Some of us are just babies and toddlers.

But that is our setting. And beyond that more specifically is who we are as persons.

And so, just as in the first century, there is a group consciousness here. There is a communal experience. Gathering around the risen Christ is something we do together.

And it is true that recognition of the risen Christ and our being together go hand in hand.

Both are part and parcel of being the church. And it is not in our best interest to neglect either. It is in our best interest as a church to maintain our focus on the risen Lord. And it is in our best interest to maintain the focus on us. For we will not just discern Christ on the beach. We will discern Christ among ourselves: in a smile, in a work, in a song, in a prayer, in a conversation, or perhaps in an individual dawning of awareness.

And we must look for Christ within our community, within ourselves. At the same time we will see Christ “over there” or “on the beach.” And in that seeing we see him in new settings and in new stories. May God give us eyes to see “over there” and “up ahead.” And may he give us eyes to see within ourselves and within each other. Amen.