

## ***WHEN YOUR NET IS EMPTY***

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May 5, 2019; Easter 3, Year C

Acts 9:8-20; John 21:1-19

***“Jesus said to them, ‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’  
They answered him, ‘No.’”***

John 21:5

For that party of seasoned fishermen, it had been a rough night. “That night they caught nothing,” says John. *Nothing*. Not a single fish.

For Peter, their leader, that had to be especially humiliating. He was a professional — or had been, before he began following Jesus up and down the land. That repetitive motion, of throwing a small weighted net off one side of the boat, then slowly pulling it in, hand over hand: it was second nature to him. He could have done it in his sleep.

You can bet Peter knew all the prime fishing spots, too. This was his home country: the little fishing villages that hug the shore of the Sea of Galilee. But this night? *Nada*.

It’s a bit of a mystery why Peter and the others decided to go back to fishing, after they’d seen — and even touched — the risen Christ. Although, in fairness to them, Jesus isn’t easy to follow, in those days after the resurrection. He’s here with them one moment and gone the next. He’s a hard man to pin down, this risen Jesus.

Maybe it's not so strange that they would go back to fishing. It's what they knew. People didn't change careers in biblical times, the way they do today. In fact, the very concept of career as something you choose was foreign to them. If you were a man and had a trade, like fishing, it was very likely because your father had done the very same thing. There were no banks to offer start-up business loans for the purchase of boats and nets. You inherited the tools of the trade from your father. And he had very likely inherited them from *his* old man.

James and John are among those fishing with Peter that day. They'd had the common experience of being called by Jesus: all of them, together. Come with me and I'll teach you to fish for people, he'd said. They got up and followed, without a word: surprising even themselves.

But here they now are: back in a fishing boat again. Time to get back to the nets.

Except — the nets aren't cooperating (or maybe it's the fish that aren't cooperating). But there's a guy standing on the shoreline a hundred yards away who seems to have an idea what to do.

They can barely see him in the early-morning gloom, as he cups his hands to his mouth and shouts out the perennial question those who love fishing must always endure: "Catching anything?"

That's not *exactly* what he says. "You don't have any fish, do you, lads?" is more like it.

Glumly they return their answer: "Not a one."

Is his question a sarcastic dig — a criticism? Surely it's a good deal more sympathetic than that, because when the man shouts back — something about casting their net on the other side of the boat — they do what he says, without question.

*Bingo.* They've just caught a whole night's haul in one cast. The net's so full, fairly groaning with fish, they can't even haul it in. The best they can do is tie it off, put their oars in the water and pull towards shore, dragging the bulging net behind them.

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Their nets had been empty. I've had times like that, in the course of my life. Haven't you? Times when what you've always done, but it just doesn't seem to be working anymore. It's times like those when you find yourself doing the thing that's supposed to be the classic definition of insanity: repeating the same action over and over, expecting a different result!

The thing about fishing, though, is: sometimes that actually works!  
Sometimes a little persistence is all you need. It's one of the reasons why

recreational fishing with a rod and reel is so addictive — why people who like to fish are so eager to keep on repeating those motions. Just one more cast. Maybe it will be different...

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What is it, in your life right now, that's causing your nets to come back empty? Is it something to do with your work? Or maybe your retirement, that hasn't turned out quite the way you'd imagined? Maybe you're still young, and at school, and you just hate the situation you find yourself in: your place in the school pecking order you can't seem to bust out of. Or maybe it's a close family relationship — even a marriage — that's grown cold over time, and you just don't know how to breathe life back into it. Maybe it's your Christian faith itself. It always seemed to bring you strength and comfort in the past. But now — you're not so sure. The net comes back empty, no matter how many times you cast it.

Sometimes you and I get all caught up in the works-righteousness thing, the conviction that we've got to save ourselves, by dint of hard work and persistence. That's exactly what's going on in this Bible story, as Peter and the others just keep casting the nets again and again.

But do you know what's the most beautiful thing in this story? Those guys aren't even looking for Jesus. But they don't have to. *He finds them!* He finds

them.

When Peter finally realizes it *is* Jesus, he does the strangest-sounding thing. It says in verse 7, “When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea!” There’s something odd about that: who puts clothes on to go swimming?

But that’s not really what’s going on here. The Greek is hard to translate into English. A literal translation, which is what we have here, sounds bizarre — but most biblical experts agree that, rather than saying Peter is out there fishing in the buff (something no observant Jew would ever do), what the Greek is really saying is that he’s stripped down to a loincloth. (Very practical garb for someone handling soaking-wet nets.)

When Peter realizes it’s *Jesus* standing there along the beach, he grabs his tunic, wraps it around his waist a few times and jumps into the water. That’s what you’d do if you wanted to get to shore with your clothes, but had to keep your limbs free to swim.

Now, Peter could have just jumped into the water, wearing only his loincloth, but the fact that he takes his tunic with him says something very important about his state of mind. What it says is this: Peter knows — now that he’s seen Jesus — he’s not going back to the fishing boat again! He’s done with

that. He's going to leave his old fisherman-self behind, completely, and throw in his lot with his Lord and master once again.

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That couldn't have been the easiest thing to do: because Peter and Jesus have some unfinished business. But now, Jesus takes care of it. He makes it right.

John takes pains to tell us that Jesus has a little cookfire going there on the beach, on which he's grilling a few fish. "Come and have breakfast!" he says to them: a greeting as ordinary as it is inviting.

The whole scene calls to mind something else that happens, earlier in John's Gospel. It happens in a spot not far from this very stretch of beach. It's alongside that very Sea of Galilee that a hungry crowd has gathered, and no way do the disciples have enough food to feed them. They gather up five measly loaves of bread and two smoked fish, and Jesus tells them to start dividing them up, and — what do you know? — it's enough to feed a multitude!

Same spot: or very nearly so. Same menu: bread and fish. Whenever Jesus Christ starts handing out food — whether by the lakeshore or at the Lord's Table — he does so in mind-boggling abundance!

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John provides us with a little detail, here, that may likewise seem to be

incidental — but in fact, it's central to what's about to happen. John tells us it's a *charcoal* fire.

The Greek word he uses for “charcoal fire” occurs only one other time in the whole New Testament. Can you guess where that is? (If you can, you win the Bible trivia prize for today!)

It occurs in that scene when Peter denies Jesus the first time. It's a dark, bone-chilling night. He's stumbling through the streets of the unforgiving city when he comes upon a charcoal fire in a brazier. Several people are standing there, warming their hands over the flame, and Peter steps up and joins them. As he's rubbing his hands together — rather like Pilate did, when he was washing his hands of Jesus — one of the others says, “I know you: you were with the Galilean rabbi they just arrested!” And Peter says, “No. I wasn't. It was someone else.”

Two more times he does it. Two more acts of betrayal, before the cock crowed.

As Peter stands there on the beach, looking into the eyes of his Lord and master, the aroma that floods his nostrils is that of burning charcoal. The sense of smell is a powerfully evocative thing. For him, it's the scent of betrayal.

Such are the memories that occur to Peter, all through that breakfast on the beach. Yes, he's overjoyed to be with Jesus once again, but his joy is not

complete: because of that nagging memory wafted on ribbons of charcoal smoke.

Well, Jesus has it covered. At some point toward the end of the meal, Jesus' eyes meet his. And then the Risen Lord says the most extraordinary thing: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

"Feed my lambs."

The two of them repeat the exchange two more times. It's ordinary conversation, but it's also a strange sort of liturgy.

Is it an accident that the threefold formula corresponds to the three times Peter denied him? *No*. Here, with infinite patience and grace, the Lord is walking Peter back through his greatest regrets, his most heart-searing memories.

What's happening here is what they call the *healing* of memories — which is among the most profound and fruitful healings of all. Jesus gives Peter the chance to live that episode of his life over, and to make it right this time.

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So, what *is* it that's making your nets come up empty, these days? There's a very real possibility that, somewhere at the bottom of that net of yours there's a hole, a ragged tear in the netting — and because of that flaw, the net can hold no fish. What you've got to do, by God's grace, is to go mend your net. You've got to

sew that hole up. Only it's not something you can do yourself. You need someone else to do it for you. You need an expert fisherman, a true mender of nets.

What you need is Jesus Christ. He's the one who will listen to your tale of shame and regret with infinite patience. He's the one who will take your pain upon himself. He's the one who, by his amazing grace, will walk you back through what you've done (or failed to do), and make you whole again.

"Do you love me more than these?" he wants to know.

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

"Then, do the thing I've called you to do. Feed. My. Sheep."

Let us pray:

**Deep in the hearts of all of us, Lord Jesus,  
way down in the darkness where no one else can see,  
there is that dread place we shudder to mention:  
the place of infinite pain.  
We strive to live our lives  
without admitting it's even there.  
We admit it to no one else.  
But you are no stranger to places of darkness.  
You have plunged into the infinite darkness of death  
and come back, as the rising sun returns at break of day.  
And so, at the weary end of all nights of fruitless striving,  
you await us,  
stoking the charcoal fire against the cold  
and offering that blessed invitation, "Come and have breakfast."  
Yes, Lord: you know that we love you.  
And we *will* feed your lambs. Amen.**

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