

AN EASTER POSTSCRIPT
2. “Cast Your Nets Again”

John 21: 1-19

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April 26, 2015

It had been a time that he could never have imagined...a time in which the great pendulum of his emotions had swung from the depths of a nightmare to the heights of a dream too good to be true. And now, in the aftermath of it all, Peter needed a break—an opportunity to collect himself...to allow the new reality of the empty tomb to settle into his thinking. So it was that he decided to step back into a familiar role from a former life. Peter decided to go fishing. And why not? It would be good to get back on the water and to experience, once more, the familiar sights and sounds and smells of the fishermen’s life he had left behind when Jesus had called him to follow.

And it was good, to be sure. But, it seems that there was just one little problem...no fish! All night they had fished and tried every depth and location that had worked for them in the past, but it didn’t make any difference. The nets came up empty, again and again.

It was as the dawn was taking hold and the sky was beginning to morph from dull gray into subtle shades of red and orange that he noticed a figure standing alone on the beach. “Have you caught anything?” came the question, amplified by the stillness of the lake. “Not a thing!” someone in the boat replied—with not a little frustration.

“Cast your net again to the other side of the boat and you will find what you’re looking for.” Now, Peter and the other disciples with him might have taken offense. After all, they were professional fishermen! They had been away for a while, but they still knew the lake and its secrets like the backs of their hands! Who does this stranger think he is—telling us how to fish!! It’s possible that they might have entertained the thought of such a response, but a fishless night had humbled them considerably. And besides, they figured it couldn’t hurt to do as was suggested. Maybe it would provide the fishermen’s luck that they clearly lacked.

And so, one more time, they hauled their nets in and one more time, they cast them out—this time on the other side of the boat. They watched as the nets settled into dark green and black of the great lake. But suddenly, the net was pulled downward by a force greater than gravity. Suddenly, there were dozens of fish leaping to the surface, trying to escape the net that had engulfed them.

With surprise and amazement, the suddenly excited fishermen began to reverse the process and retrieve their nets. The number of fish, however, and their weight in the net, made it almost impossible to fully bring the nets in. Instead, the fishermen decided that they would limp to shore with a catch unlike anything they had ever experienced. As the boat swung toward the shore, there was another and even greater surprise. For it was at that moment that someone raised their arm and pointed to the stranger with the good

advice. “It’s the Lord!” he shouted and suddenly, they couldn’t get the boat ashore fast enough. That was certainly the case for Peter who wasn’t inclined to wait. He promptly dove into the chilly water, swimming with strength and speed that easily outpaced the boat. Peter was the first to reach the shore, the first to experience his long awaited moment of reunion with Jesus.

If you will recall the story of Peter, you will recognize that there was much to talk about. He still carried the burden of having denied on three occasions that he even knew Jesus. and that burden was increasingly heavy. But that conversation would have to wait until the others had arrived with their fish filled nets and they all shared breakfast together. What an amazing moment that must have been for all of them—to be together again and to share in the holy eucharis of a last breakfast together.

It was after breakfast when the others were cleaning fish and mending nets that the moment came...Jesus and Peter walked off by themselves and the conversation began.

Sitting there, watching the waves lap up on the shore, Jesus didn’t mince his words. **“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”** You will note, of course, that he didn’t ask the question once, but asked it three times—once for each of Peter’s denials. And three times, Peter responds, **“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”** And three times Jesus offers a new commission to Peter: **“Feed my lambs...tend my lambs...feed my sheep.”**

It is with this story that the Gospel of John comes to its conclusion—and a more fitting conclusion I cannot imagine. For, ultimately, when all is said and done, it is grace that has the final word.

This, of course, is the second in this brief, two part series of sermons on “An Easter Postscript.” Last week, we considered the story of Thomas and the expression of his doubt that opened the door to a new and profound faith. This week, we are considering the story of Peter and the way in which his heart breaking denial of Jesus was transformed by grace into the life changing commission to feed and tend God’s sheep.

It was precisely when Peter believed that his life had come to a miserable end that he was to discover an unexpected new beginning. And it is precisely here that we see, once again, the transforming power of the Gospel. Out of our doubt springs a faith alive and vital. Out of our denial comes the grace that enables us to let the past stay in the past and begin again.

We see this so clearly in the simple invitation of Jesus to, **“Cast your nets again.”** Here is the reminder that it is grace that enables us to overcome the empty net and the broken promise...grace that empowers us to move beyond our doubt and our denial, our failure and our brokenness. It is grace that invites us pick up the pieces of our broken lives and begin again.

You may recall that last week, I suggested that in the journey of this life, we all come to the place of crisis when life tends to come apart and we are forced to recognize that even if we play by the rules, work hard and do the right thing, there are no guarantees. Sometimes, bad things happen to good and well intentioned people.

And it is precisely in those moments that we are confronted with a choice of how we shall live in the face of the disappointment and failure that inevitably comes.

Will we complain that life isn't fair—that we deserve better—that there must be some mistake? We can do that, of course, but if you've been there and done that, you know that this is an approach that soon wears out its welcome with others and leaves us with only an empty feeling within ourselves.

Or, will we allow our disappointment and failure to become the key that unlocks the door to a way of thinking and a way of living that we didn't even know was possible? Will we allow our moments of doubt, denial and despair to be but a prelude to a new life that we had never imagined?

I doubt that Peter, caught in the depths of his denial, could have ever imagined the future that he would find as a leader of the early Church. In fact, I doubt that he could imagine much a future—period.

But then came the invitation of Jesus to cast the nets again and suddenly, what he thought was his end, became a place of new beginning.

Once again, I believe that it is significant that the writer of John's Gospel chose to add the Easter postscripts that detailed the doubt of Thomas and the denial of Peter. If nothing else, these stories serve to remind us that the good news of the resurrection doesn't automatically change everything. There is still the reality of our doubt and denial, our failure and our brokenness that we must contend with. **But, by the grace of God, there is also the invitation to let go of the past and to cast our nets again.**

I recently saw a news story about Karen Rand, a woman who was injured when bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon. Not only did Karen lose her leg in the bombing, but she also lost her best friend, Krystle Campbell who died from her wounds. It was, needless to say, a devastating blow. One minute, she had been preparing to take pictures of her boyfriend crossing the finish line and the next minute finding that her world had been—literally—blown apart.

But Karen was not one to roll up in a ball and lose herself in self-pity. She did her best to move forward with her life, adjusting to the new and sometimes challenging life of wearing a prosthetic leg. As she was doing that, she became aware of a young fourteen year old girl in El Salvador who had been hit by a drag racing car and had also lost her leg. Without the money or support for an artificial limb, the girl was destined to spend the rest her life on crutches.

It was when Karen heard of the story of Melissa Estefania Salinas, that she began to feel as if there was something that she might do to help out. But, Karen wanted to do more than just send a few dollars toward a new prosthetic leg. She wanted to offer more tangible support. And so she did. Over the period of several months she worked to have Melissa

brought to Boston where she could receive not only her new leg, but also the care that she would need in her rehabilitation.

As this news story pointed out, Melissa now has her new leg and thanks to Karen and her friends, she has the love and support of a whole new family and a whole new life.

This is, I believe, a remarkable story—one that serves to remind us about the power and possibility that resides within the human spirit. Whereas Karen could not have been faulted if she had chosen to become bitter and angry about her tragic circumstance, she did not give into the “pity party” as she referred to it. Instead, she chose to allow our tragedy to become a catalyst for a triumph that she would have never imagined. She chose to “cast her nets again” and discovered a new and powerful life.

It was Hemingway who observed that “the world breaks everyone...and afterward, many are strong at the broken places.” In her choice to “cast her nets again,” Karen was made strong at the broken place.

Now, our own stories may not be as dramatic or newsworthy as the story of Karen and Melissa, but we also have stories—stories that can give witness to our own choices to face down the struggles and tragedies, to deal with our doubts and our denials as we learn to place our trust in the grace of God.

We too, can be made strong at the broken places.

We too, can discover that in our end is our beginning.

We too, can cast our nets again. Amen.