



Is it back to square one?

John 21:1-19

In the Lent and Easter period, I find myself busy reading around the passages that guide our thinking. This often takes the form of comparing the different accounts of both the passion and resurrection narratives.

Because of the public nature of our Easter Day services, I look at them through the eyes of those who are arriving fresh to the stories of the risen Lord.

On Easter Day at the Opera House I focused on this passage that is a set reading for this Sunday. I return to it this evening, but with new aspects to look at together.

All four gospel writers present their accounts of the resurrection in different ways, but one aspect uniting them is that they tell the story with remarkable understatement.

The Christian Church today may have a very different approach. This would be true for churches of all persuasions. Many seek to pull out all the stops in order to be as dramatic and compelling as possible in their presentation of the Easter message. I have known groups of Christians, usually dull, make huge efforts to make an impression upon the community in which they are set. This is understandable, for it is an exciting message, but the gospels do not give us such a lead.

One lectionary writer tells of a church seeking to convey the power of Easter with a service that was planned over many weeks. The impact would have been huge, if not a little outrageous.

This service began sedately, only to have two women suddenly burst through the back doors of the worship area, flailing their way down the aisle, screaming "He's alive!" This, then, served as the cue for the choir to jump to its feet in a rousing anthem, accompanied by all the brass the church had been able to muster.

Another reference was made to a drama which saw a young person playing the corpse of Jesus' body in a tomb. As the congregation watched, suddenly little Christmas tree lights began to blink up and down the length of the body. This was followed by a trap door opening and the body of Jesus disappearing. Within seconds, the actor who portrayed Jesus then reappeared at centre stage and the congregation rose to its feet to sing a jazzed up version of Handel's *Halleluiah Chorus*.

These stories might impress some, but they are so different from the gospel accounts of Easter! It was Fredrick Buechner who pointed to the fact that the gospel writers get to the climax of their stories only to whisper.

Mark famously ends in a lurch with silence, terrified women flee from the tomb and we are left with great questions. The other gospels say more, but even there the stories are toned down. A stranger walks up from behind and casually enquires, "What's up?" We are told a man, mistaken for a gardener, shuffles up behind Mary to ask, "Why are you crying?"

For these reasons I find the account in John 21 highly consistent with the presentation of the gospel of a risen Lord. A stranger appears on the shore and one can imagine him



cupping his hands as he shouts, “Caught anything?” There are no bright lights, no bands, no brass and not a Halleluiah strain to be heard.

I would, however, make the point that obedience precedes recognition and it is in obedience to the voice of Jesus Christ that the disciples discover who he is. This passage draws such a close link between the wonderful experience of “grace and forgiveness” and “seeing and believing”.

There is something remarkably compelling about the account in John 21. Interestingly, it is used by many on this Sunday alongside the account of the conversion of St Paul in the Acts of the Apostles. It is a passage of transformation and challenge.

When reaching the concluding words of John 20, it sounds as though you have come to the end of the book. The gospel appears to wrap up with the resounding words, *“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”*

E C Hoskyns suggested this was an appropriate conclusion: “A Christian gospel ends properly, not with the appearance of the risen Lord to his disciples, and their belief in him, but with a confident statement that his mission to the world, undertaken at his command and under his authority, would be the means by which many are saved.”

That is a great ending in itself. However, just when it sounds as if it’s all over, there is just one more story to tell. Some people have talked about another person having written the last chapter – or many hands having played a part. None of that concerns me very much, because there is a real sense of an eye witness about this final chapter of John.

There are three scenes from this passage to which I draw your attention and I hope, in doing so, to ask what these have to say to us about our own discipleship and following of Jesus Christ. We must meet Jesus in the ways that are appropriate for ourselves but, as we observe this group of disciples meeting him at the lakeside, it raises thoughts about how we are to meet him today.

I offer to you three thoughts about what is happening for the disciples and we can explore together whether this was really ‘Going back to square one’ and what would be an equivalent experience for us:-

Back to fishing

The decision to go fishing, taking the lead from Peter, was not essentially to run away from their mission. The disciples were in the Galilee region, responding to Jesus’ instruction to meet him there – and they were by the sea.

Some people have been highly critical of this fishing expedition and see it as an expression of the disciples’ disobedience and apostasy, especially as it would appear that their mission was to begin in Jerusalem, a great distance from where they now found themselves. I think Beasley-Murray is right to conclude, “Never has a fishing trip been so severely judged!”

The experience of the last week had been so dramatic for the disciples. It could be described as tension-filled from the moment Jesus led the disciples into the city of Jerusalem, followed by all the events that led to the cross.



One writer commented, “Surely in the hours following Jesus’ death the disciples were crushed and numb. The human spirit can only take so much. Then came the events that brought an emotional overload of another sort altogether – news of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances that had to be seen to be believed.”

These experiences would not only overwhelm and change the lives of the disciples for ever, they would set in motion events that would change the story of the whole world.

Could it be that in the immediate aftermath of these encounters, the disciples needed emotional space and considerable time to be able to assimilate what had happened?

It was not difficult, therefore, for the disciples to respond eagerly to Peter’s lead, “I’m going fishing.”

- The decision is to return to their former trade and sets the scene where they cannot avoid the presence of the risen Lord. If they cannot hide from him on the lake, then there is nowhere they can go.
- At a place of emotional overload, the ordinary and the routine will no longer apply, for the word of the psalmist seems to speak into such an experience, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalm 139:7)
- Does it raise the challenge for all of us as to what ‘going back fishing’ might mean at those moments when we need to be aware of the presence of the risen Lord? Do we go back to our office? Do we retreat to the garden? But wherever we turn, he will find us there.

In this short section of John’s Gospel, we have a situation that takes us back to the original calling of disciples by Lake Galilee. In the Synoptics, it was by the lake that the ministry of the disciples was initiated by Jesus ... and in John we have the first appearance of the Lord to the disciples in the same setting, where Jesus had also called Philip and Nathaniel.

At Galilee, the link between both the call of the disciples and the Lord’s resurrection appearance reinforces for me the fact that a leader will always be a follower in Christian discipleship.

I was talking with a colleague just a few weeks ago about those in ministry who lay down their responsibility, but never lay down their discipleship. We are always following Jesus Christ.

I share with you some words I found meaningful in relation to this: “Leadership in the Christian community is destined to misuse its prerogatives and fail unless at the same time it is embraced as discipleship.”

Back to failure

Of all the passages in the gospels which demonstrate the failure of the disciples, this has to be the strongest. It speaks of the failure of the disciples in general, but rather more specifically it concludes with the failure of Peter. I made much of this on Easter Day and so I speak into the more general aspects this evening.



There is something very striking about the words which close verse 3 and open verse 4 in this chapter: “So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning ...”

The comparison between night and early morning cannot be lost on us. Night was without doubt the preferred time for fishing in the Sea of Galilee, but this trip was to prove fruitless.

As these highly-qualified fishermen returned to shore in the dim light of dawn, their emotions would encapsulate the experience of failure.

One writer on John’s Gospel proffers the thought that this is an example of the irony of the gospel writer. For though Peter thinks he is going back to what he is very capable of doing, even that becomes a failure. Perhaps he had forgotten the fact that he had been told, as a disciple of Christ, his role was not merely to catch fish, but to be “a fisher of men and women”.

Many early writers on John 21 saw much to gain from comparing the different aspects of the role of the Beloved Disciple (who is of course John) and that of Peter.

John Chrysostom in his *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, suggests, “When they recognised him, the disciples Peter and John exhibited their different temperaments. The one was fervent, the other more contemplative. The one was ready to go, the other more penetrating. John is the one who first recognised Jesus, but Peter is the first to come to him.”

Peter’ eagerness on this occasion may well have a good deal to say about the fact that he was in a place of real need that only Jesus Christ could deal with.

In his commentary, John Marsh sums up the situation, “The night was the best time for fishing, but on their own, without their Lord, nothing could be made even of the best opportunities.”

Failure is an interesting theme to explore. It can be the beginning of a fresh understanding. Perhaps this is what led Woodrow Wilson to say, “I would rather fail in a cause that will ultimately succeed than to succeed in a cause that will ultimately fail.”

An assistant of Thomas Edison once tried to console the inventor over a failure to achieve in a series of experiments what he had set out to find: “It’s too bad,” he said, “to do all that work without results.” “Oh,” said Mr Edison, “we have lots of results. We know 700 things that won’t work.”

What really matters is that we do not become unhealthily focused upon failure. C S Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters* are still worth reading. He vividly describes Satan’s strategy: “He gets Christians to become preoccupied with their failures; from then on, the battle is won and lost for us.”

What we discover about Peter in the gospels greatly helps us as we observe his sheer humanity. Yet out of his failure are built qualities of leadership which will prove to be indispensable in the early days of Christian mission.



Back to calling

The invitation to breakfast is powerful because it speaks of the fact that they are able to contribute the huge catch Jesus had helped them to haul.

This is a meal eaten in silence and I am sure we have all had experiences which mirror that. But this silence is because they were awestruck and dare not ask the question that was flowing through each of their minds, *"Who are you?"* (v.12)

As they share the meal, it would appear that there is an unveiling of his presence and the gospel writer describes it as a moment of great magnitude, *"This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead."* (v.14)

The passage that follows is of course the reinstatement of Peter and having that clearly in our minds, I refer to the final words of verse 19, *"Follow me."*

Hearing that Jesus invites them to breakfast, and observing his manner with them and with Peter in his fresh sense of call, would assure the disciples that the Last Supper was far from the end, as they shared this first breakfast. He continues to share in their fellowship and supplies the strength and nurture that they are going to need.

Peter had some outstanding moments of encounter with Jesus, many of which revealed his humanity. Here in the gospel we are brought face to face with the fact that, as Christians today, we have to learn what it means to explore our following in the light of the deep call of Christ.

We can all relate to this encounter by the lakeside. For Jesus keeps accepting us and calling us on. Grace means new beginnings and it is true that it may call us back to square one again and again, but we are never the same because, as we respond to his call, we continue to grow in grace through the resurrection life which Jesus alone gives to his people.

Bishop Will Willimon told the story from one of his United Methodist churches in Alabama. After a long discussion in a way that only church meetings can deliver, a woman blurted out in frustration, "I spent 38 years thinking God was mad at me. I tried this and that to get God to like me. When I came here, for the first time I heard about grace. This church, for all its problems, is the place where God finally brought me to my senses about what God really thinks of me. Now it's my job to tell everyone else that God is not mad at us; God loves us."