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John 21:4-14  
**The Inapparent Presence**  
M. Craig Barnes

Simon Peter was overwhelmed. First came Jesus' arrest and then his crucifixion. About the time Peter had settled into his grief, Mary Magdalene dragged him to Jesus' empty tomb. Then the risen Jesus just appeared in the place where the disciples were staying and said, "Peace be with you," but then he disappeared. A week later he reappeared to them, showed his scars to Thomas and said, "Blessed are those who believe without seeing." Then, disappeared again.

So Peter had to be thinking "He's alive. He's dead. He's alive again. He's here. He's not here. He's here again. He's gone again." It was too much to handle.

Whenever Peter's fuses get blown by Jesus, he always does the same thing - he looks at the other disciples and says, "I'm going fishing." And he talks about half of them into going fishing with him. Fishing was Peter's fall back plan. It is what he was doing before he met Jesus, and he always figured he could return to it if the Savior thing doesn't work out. Like Peter we want to follow Jesus who we believe is the Savior. But if he doesn't fulfill our expectations, we figure we can always go to grad school or fall back on the resumé, the family, or our ability to really work hard.

You know this old life pretty well and have serious doubts that it will save you, but at least it is something you understand, which is more than you can say about your knowledge of Jesus. Isn't it interesting that every time in the gospels we find the disciples fishing because they're frustrated with Jesus, they are never catching any fish? I really don't have to explain that metaphor for you.

After another experience of fishing all night at sea and catching nothing, the boat was nearing the shore when the disciples saw a man on the beach telling them to cast the net on the other side of the boat. Now if you have ever returned from a disastrous fishing trip you know that the last thing you want is to receive fishing tips from a casual observer: "You should try the star-board side of the boat." Maybe they had a hunch this man on the beach was the risen Savior again because it sure sounds like Jesus to say something obnoxious like this. "You should try again."

Of course, as soon as they threw their nets off the other side of the boat, they caught so many fish they couldn't pull up the net. That wasn't because they had been fishing off the wrong side of the boat, and it wasn't because they tried one more time. The point is that now a risen Savior was in their midst, which means anything can happen.

If they thought it was Jesus before they threw the net back in the water, they knew it was Jesus when they saw that net bursting with fish. John said, "It is the Lord." Peter didn't say a thing. He just threw on some clothes, dove in the water, and swam to his Savior.

It may seem odd to us that Peter got dressed before jumping in the water. We usually take our clothes off before swimming. But remember this is Peter who has never let a little water keep him from Jesus. He doesn't care if he has to swim in the water or walk on it, he is going to get to Jesus as quickly as he can, and hopefully before he disappears again. I think he got dressed first for the same reason I put on vestments and the same reason you get dressed before you start your day. It was time to get back to work and to serve Christ's work.

Every time in John's Gospel that the disciples saw Jesus perform miracle, he was either doing something for a crowd of hungry sick people or he was commissioning them to do something for the crowd. So when Peter and the other disciples saw the miracle of the full net, they may have just assumed that Jesus was back in the business of doing ministry and they had better dress up and get busy helping him.

When all the disciples got to shore, however, they just found Jesus standing alone by a small campfire. He has warm bread and fish ready for them. They had to remember the last time Jesus held bread and fish and multiplied it for a crowd. But this time there was no crowd - there was just Jesus with a small meal for his few disciples.

The first thing Jesus told them to do was to go get their fish. So Peter charges back to the boat and begins to drag the net to shore. It is striking that John tells us the exact number of fish in that net. There were 153 large fish. It is unusual that John would be so exact and specific with this number, and over the centuries our Bible commentators have tried to interpret the significance of this. In the fifth century St. Jerome claimed that there were 153 species of fish in the water, and thus this represents the universal nature of the disciples' calling. Maybe. St. Augustine did some mathematical gymnastics to make the number represent the Trinity, but then again everything represents the Trinity for Augustine. Here's my idea. I think John told us the exact number for the same reason every fisherman tells you exactly how many "large" fish he caught. Because he was on the boat and he caught them. Maybe John remembers the exact number of fish because these fish, this miracle, was for them. Not the crowd.

Then Jesus said, "Come and have breakfast." There would be no 5,000 people interrupting this meal as they did earlier when the disciples tried to have a meal not far from this same location. There would be no commissioning to work and feed the hungry. At least, not just yet. That would come very soon. But first the bewildered disciples needed a time of intimacy alone with Jesus, around another meal. Before they could care about the crowds, they first needed to experience Jesus' care for them.

Ironically, many of us find it easy to believe that Jesus cares about the poor, but we find it hard to believe that he cares about us. We think that with the mess in Iraq and the Palestinian problem on his mind, if we interrupt God with our own little problems, he will snap at us, "Not now, Daddy is busy." But there is also a miracle for you. And you have to see that in order to believe for those around you.

Everyday you confront a crowd of problems: Some around you have succumbed to anger and cynicism. Others have families that are falling apart. Still others struggle with so much loneliness

and heartache. And what about the homeless guy with the tattered cardboard sign that you try not to see every day on the street? Jesus never calls his disciples to fix those problems. But he does call you to believe he can. And how will you believe there is a miracle for others if you do not really believe there is a miracle for you?

Be careful though. The real miracle here is not the 153 fish. The real miracle is that any of us can know God intimately.

Isn't it fascinating that John's Gospel begins with the extraordinary claim that from the beginning Jesus was the Word of God. "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." It begins with this great cosmic description of the person and work of Christ, but it ends at a small campfire where he is caring for a few confused disciples.

That's the miracle of the gospel. This is no casual observer. This is the Savior who cares for you. He knows you had hopes for what he would do, that he has not done. He knows that you are confused about his work, and maybe about yours. He knows that some nights you're exhausted because after all your hard work you have nothing to show. Even your fall back plan isn't working. He knows, and he cares. And he has prepared this Holy Communion meal, not for the crowd, but for you. This is your moment with God, your opportunity to see that you are not alone, not abandoned, not on your own. This is your Savior, who is with you.

Just as he is with his disciples in the sacrament of the Last Supper, so is he with us in the ordinary meal of fish and bread. So is he with us in our ordinary work and in every ordinary detail of your life. That means, again, that amazing things can happen. You have got to see that, because that crowd of spiritually hungry people you will meet tomorrow need to believe that at least you believe.

There is a world of need around you. But no one needs your anger or your exhaustion. What they need is the joy, hope, and love that is found only by disciples who know how to commune with a Savior. Amen.