

## **"The Ones who Did Not Get Away"**

A reflection for the Second Sunday of Easter  
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John 20:30-21:14

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*Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which aren't written in this book. But these ones are written so that you may believe that the Messiah, the son of God, is none other than Jesus; and that, with this faith, you may have life in his name.*

*After this, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the sea of Tiberias. This was how he showed himself.*

*Simon Peter, Thomas (known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples, were all together. Simon Peter spoke up. 'I'm going fishing,' he said. 'We'll go with you,' they replied. So they went off and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing.*

*As dawn was breaking, Jesus stood beside the seashore, but the disciples didn't know that it was Jesus. 'Children,' said Jesus to them, 'haven't you got anything to eat?' 'No!' they replied. 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat,' he said, 'and you'll find something.' So they cast the net; and now they couldn't draw it in because of the weight of the fish.*

*So the disciple that Jesus loved spoke to Peter. 'It's the Master!' he said. When Simon Peter heard that it was the Master, he wrapped his cloak around him (he had been naked for work), and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples brought the boat in to land, dragging the net full of fish. They weren't far from shore, about a hundred yards away.*

*When they came to land, they saw a charcoal fire laid there, with fish and bread on it. Jesus spoke to them. 'Bring some of the fish you've just caught,' he said. So Simon Peter went and pulled the net onto the shore. It was full of large fish, 153 in all. The net wasn't torn, even though there were so many. 'Come and have breakfast,' said Jesus to them. (None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Master.)*

*Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so also with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus had appeared to the disciples after he had been raised from the dead.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from N.T. Wright's *The Kingdom New Testament*.

I

They have gone back home. They've gone back to work.

They'd all seen Jesus, resurrected. They'd sat with him, eaten with him, talked with him. They'd marvelled at him. Jesus, crucified, dead and buried, is alive! Alive with a life beyond what any of us has experienced. They have rejoiced in Jesus, worshipped Jesus, believed in Jesus.

Now what? What's next?

*"I'm going fishing,"* says Simon, whom Jesus called Peter. He's not talking about grabbing a rod and reel, and heading out to relax at the lodge.

Fishing is their livelihood. It's what they know. They are young. Their big adventure with Jesus is over. Now it's time to settle down and do something sensible for a change. Some have families to support.<sup>2</sup> It's time to step up.

They go out on the lake. (It's called both the Sea of Galilee and the Sea of Tiberias.) They know it well. They'd spent their whole lives there, learning the trade from their fathers. Now they're in business together.

It's night, when fishing is best. They strip down because it's hard work, and long tunics and robes are not suited for this sort of thing.

They need not have bothered. All night. Working. Nothing. Back-to-business is not going so well.

Until they see Jesus. He won't let these ones get away.

II

Does this episode feel familiar? A lot like how it all began?

John, in this account of Jesus' Good News, does not tell about that time when some of them first encountered Jesus. Or, he tells the story differently. Other accounts — especially in Luke's Gospel — seem a lot like what happened here.<sup>3</sup>

Like this time, some of them had been out fishing — Simon Peter, Andrew, and the Zebedee boys. Like this time, after a long night they'd come back in with nothing. Like this time, Jesus happened along — I'm sure on purpose — and told them to try again.

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<sup>2</sup> Another time, mention is made of Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14). So either he was married. Or he had been before he met Jesus, and his wife had died.

<sup>3</sup> The details in common between John 21:1-14 and Luke 5:1-11 are the most striking. See also Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20.

Like this time, listening to Jesus, they caught more than they could imagine.

That time, they were astonished. Then, terrified. Peter especially! *Who is this Jesus?*

*"Don't be afraid,"* said Jesus. *"From now on you'll be catching people."*

With that, they left everything to follow after him.

Now? The scene is different. Still, the echoes are strong. It's pretty *déjà vu*.

Except . . . so much has happened since they first met Jesus. Including his crucifixion and resurrection. So this time has got to be different.

### III

We don't know how many they caught that first time. This time, when Jesus meets them again, after he has risen from the dead, they catch 153 fish. Exactly 153.

It's a peculiar detail that gets me wondering. Why throw this in? Some details, like the fact that Simon Peter had to get dressed up again before plunging into the water, they feel like the added flavour you get when an eyewitness is telling the story. I don't think there is any deep meaning to his refusal to go skinny dipping; I hope not! Same with the detail that the fire Jesus made on shore, he made of charcoal. It sounds like an eyewitness detail. Although it might have deeper meaning; we'll see next week.

This fact that there were 153 fish in the nets? A fisher, blown away by such a big haul, might stop, count, and keep this detail in his too-good-and-yet-it-is-true fish tale. Although maybe "153" is meant to tell us something.

Unfortunately, John the writer never says why he says this. Ever since, folks have tried to figure it out.

My favourite explanation. . . .

- How many commandments are there? 10!
- How many signs does Jesus do in John's Gospel? 7!
- 10 plus 7 gets you
- 17.
- Start adding:  $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6$ , all the way to 17.  
What do they all add up to? . . . Guess!
- 153!

. . . Wow! Okay. Nice math. No meaning. It's said that's my favourite explanation, because it's silly. I like silly. (Although some wise people have taken it very seriously!)<sup>4</sup>

Another explanation seems closer to the truth. Apparently, there was an ancient tradition that the number of kinds of fish in the sea is. . . What? Guess! 153!<sup>5</sup>

Sure, that's weird too. But not as weird. They got the number very wrong. There are more than 34,000 species of fish. But if that is what they thought. . .

(Stay with me on this!)

What if John or someone, amazed at such a haul, counted them? That makes sense.

What if there were precisely 153? Sure.

What if Jesus meant there to be 153? Could he have? The guy just rose from the dead! He can do stuff!

And if folks thought there are 153 kinds of fish in the sea?

Is Jesus telling them something about what is next for them? Us too?

#### IV

Maybe Jesus is not finished with them. Nor with us.

Jesus has come to their workplace. Maybe he comes to our workplaces, or whatever places we spend our time in. It's not only at a prayer meeting, or a Bible study, or a worship service that he meets us.

Maybe the people-catching work that he summoned them to when he first met them, continues after his resurrection. In fact, they've got more catching to do than ever. Us too.

This "fishing for people" thing, it's just a metaphor. It doesn't work if you push it too far. Folks are not fish! Catching fish in your net is not so good for the fish!

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine of Hippo came up with this arithmetic explanation. He was one of the brilliant theologians in the first centuries of the Christian movement, and continues to be worth studying. Still, in this instance his explanation is, shall we say, peculiar. See Frederick Dale Bruner, [The Gospel of John, A Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1212f.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome of Stridon offered this explanation in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. He drew from from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century writings of Oppian of Cilicia, who wrote a 5-volume work about fishing. See Bruner, 1213 and [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oppian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oppian)

When Jesus gets hold of us, however, it is the best thing that can happen to us. He catches us so he can release us: release us from the power of our sin, our guilt, our shames, our regrets, our burdens, our fears, our lies, our illusions. Jesus catches us to release us from the power of these things over us: their power to consume us, condemn us, destroy us. Jesus catches us, we who are fated to die, into his death. So with and in Jesus, who is crucified and risen, we face our deaths, we carry our crosses, and are raised with him. So even death has no power over us, not anymore. Getting caught in Jesus' net is eternal life. And it begins now.

Getting caught in Jesus' net, he brings us into his work of catching others too. Jesus so deeply wants to catch them, and everyone, because he loves them. He knows them. And he wants life for them. He makes us fishing partners in sharing his love and his life.

For everyone! Every kind of fish. None is left out, not by Jesus. He can hold us all; his net will not break. *"The net wasn't torn, even though there were so many."*

The thing is. We will do none of this, without Jesus. We think we know what we're doing. We work hard, all night long. Nothing. Without Jesus showing us how to do it, we are no good for anybody.

Jesus, though, he won't let anyone get away. Not even us.

V

Still . . . I can't stop thinking of naked Peter. . . .

Actually, it's getting-dressed-super-fast, plunging-into-the-water, racing-to-shore got-to-get-to-Jesus Peter whom I'm stuck on.

Jesus asks for some of the fish. Peter races over, and hauls the net-full over to Jesus, all by himself.

He's trying really hard to please Jesus.

What's with Peter? . . . That's next week.