RESURRECTION IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN CHAPTER 21

Today we will look at a 16th century fresco from the Dionysiou Monastery on Mt. Athos in Greece. Unfortunately, part of the image is blocked by the gaudy, gilt baroque-style woodwork in front of it, but nonetheless we can see enough of the image for our purposes.

Obviously, it is a boat full of men fishing, and one man swimming toward shore: If we look to the right, we can see a figure (partially hidden by the woodwork in the foreground) identifiable as Jesus. How do we know? First, he has the halo with three points of the cross visible in it. That is characteristic of Jesus. Second, we see the Greek letters IC XC above his head, abbreviating Ιεσούς Χριστός — “Jesus Christ” — so there is no doubt about who it represents.

We should also look down below Jesus, where we see — again partially hidden by the woodwork — a round loaf of bread marked with a cross, and part of a fish lying on what look like red rocks. That is another clue.

If you know the New Testament reasonably well, you probably already identified the scene. But if there is any doubt, we need only look at the fragment of Greek inscription at upper right:

It is not a title inscription. It is Jesus talking, and we find his words in the Gospel called “of John,” chapter 21: “And he said to them, Cast to the right side of the boat the net, and you shall find.”

Notice that in this story, the ability of Jesus to appear in “another form,” the disciples do not at first recognize him.

Also, it is interesting to note that the word translated above as “anything to eat,” when Jesus asks the disciples if they have any, is προσφάγιον/prosphagion in the original Greek. It commonly means cooked fish as food, but it can also mean other things eaten with/on bread — literally something “to eat.”

Notice that we also now know what the little “red rocks” are that the fish is lying on in the fresco — they are the hot coals mentioned in 21:9: As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread. The round loaf of bread is reminiscent of the Eucharist.

This week we take a look at Chapter 21 of John’s Gospel. The Gospel of John seems to end rather clearly at the end of Chapter 20. Chapter 21 seems to have been added to the Gospel at a later time and yet has some important themes that connect with the rest of John’s Gospel. We will look at it in its connection with the rest of John’s Gospel but also with some connection to the other Gospels. This Chapter does not seem to fit because the disciples act as if they had never seen the risen Jesus, when in Chapter 20 they clearly saw him on at least two occasions. We will look at this Chapter in four parts:

21:1-8   The appearance of Jesus and the miraculous catch of fish at the Sea of Tiberias
21:9-14  The meal of bread and fish
21:15-19 Jesus and Simon Peter
21:20-24 Jesus and the Beloved Disciple

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR THE WEEK

The Resurrection of Jesus in John’s Gospel
John 21:1-25

Miraculous Catch

Peter’s Denial
John 18:15-18, 25-27
John 21:1-8 The Appearance of Jesus at the Sea of Tiberias and the Miraculous Catch of Fish

The last time that Jesus and his disciples were in Galilee at the Sea of Tiberias was on the occasion of the multiplication of the loaves (John 6). That event is certainly in the background for this event. At the end of chapter 6 Peter speaks for the other disciples who choose to stay with Jesus as others are leaving him. And here in John 21, Peter rouses the disciples to go out fishing together. Of those seven disciples who are listed, Nathaniel is spoken of here and has not been mentioned since the very beginning of the Gospel (John 1:45-51). Four of those who are mentioned are members of the Twelve: Simon Peter, Thomas, and the sons of Zebedee. What may appear awkward here is that these four have, in Chapter 20, seen the risen Jesus in Jerusalem, were sent out by him, and received the Holy Spirit are now fishing in Galilee. Thomas had this dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus and we see no evidence of change. Maybe this Chapter warns us about having emotional experiences of Jesus and once the emotion fades, then so too does our faith. Our emotional experiences of Jesus may be good things, but they somehow have to root us in a faith that is not just emotional but a faith that is rooted in action, rooted in service. In another way it might reinforce the saying of Jesus that shows the limitations of those who saw the risen Jesus and how truly “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

If we are going to examine this chapter based on how it fits into John’s Gospel, we need to clarify a few things. In John’s Gospel we don’t hear about Jesus calling the disciples to be “fishers of men.” That scene is found at the beginning of Mark and Matthew’s Gospels. In Luke’s Gospel we find this story connected to the story of the disciples fishing all night and catching nothing and Jesus instructing them to throw the nets in again and they catch so many fish the nets are at the point of breaking. The Synoptic Gospels then place these stories at the beginning of the disciples’ ministry with Jesus and they become predictive of a future ministry that will come only after the ministry of Jesus is over. John offers this miraculous catch of fish story after the resurrection. The disciples were sent out by Jesus in Chapter 20 but now have returned to their former life of fishing. Jesus uses their fishing trade to illustrate what they must begin to do. With the assistance of Jesus they will be able to make the catch, and a catch that will be more than they can haul in by themselves.

"Children have you caught anything to eat?
Cast the net over the right side and you will find something."

The miraculous catch of fish moves the Beloved Disciple to recognize that the stranger on the shore is Jesus. This is similar to his seeing the burial clothes in the tomb in Chapter 20 and recognizing that Jesus has risen. In a similar process Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus when he calls her name and immediately she tries to hold on to his feet. Here Simon Peter hears the Beloved Disciple say that “it is the Lord” and immediately jumps in the water to swim to Jesus. These moments might have us reflect on how signs in nature or in our daily lives might lead us to recognize the presence of God that is always there. And there are other times where our interactions with others can lead us to recognize the presence of God in them and in ourselves.

John 21:9-14 The Meal of Bread and Fish

Although the scene shifts to focus on the meal of bread and fish, the catch of fish is still significant to the story. There is a strong missionary symbolism associated with this catch of fish. Even though John and Peter have recognized the stranger as Jesus, the Lord, the disciples are left struggling with bringing in the catch of fish. When they arrive they see a charcoal fire with bread and fish on it. When Jesus asks them to bring some of the fish they just caught, Simon Peter rushes to help them bring in the catch. There are a
number of symbolic things in this story - that the net is not torn and that there are 153 large fish in the net. In the missionary symbolism of this catch, the net not being torn is thought to symbolize the fact the disciples will bring in great numbers of people to believe in Jesus and they will be united, not torn apart or separated. Their unity will be one of the hallmarks of the disciples missionary efforts. The 153 large fish has a number of explanations in history: for some it is an eyewitness account where someone actually counted the number of fish, for others the number represents the number of known fish in the world at that time. The disciples will be extremely successful with the help of Jesus in this missionary harvest.

It is still somewhat difficult to believe that the disciples at this point still do not recognize Jesus. Although John has them recognize Jesus when he invites them to “come and eat your breakfast.” It may take them back to their first encounter with Jesus when he says to them, “come and see.” We have also seen in the story of Emmaus how Jesus is recognized in the context of a meal and here it seems that the disciples recognize that it is Jesus when he takes the bread and gives it to them and in a similar way the fish. Which would also remind them of what happened in this very place with the multiplication of the loaves and fish. Jesus took the loaves and after giving thanks distributed the bread to those who were seated and in a similar way the fish. At this original event Jesus stated that “the bread I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world...” John’s readers might be recalling how their own celebration of the Eucharist is also about recognizing the risen Jesus present to them in the eucharistic bread.

JOHN 21:15-19 Jesus and Simon Peter

It is interesting that the story changes here to no longer be about the miraculous catch of fish to tending the sheep, or so it seems! The miraculous catch of fish was about the missionary activity of the church and how the disciples would now, with the help of Jesus, preach the message to all people and bring them in like a large catch of fish. But once the people were brought in there would be a need to shepherd them, a much more pastoral image. Peter is being set up as the lead pastor of the this large group of people, the church.

Jesus also addresses Peter, as “Simon, son of John.” There is one other place where Jesus addresses him in this way, John 1:42, where Jesus gave him the name “Cephas (which means Peter).” In addressing Peter in this way, Jesus is marking Peter out by “name” (or identification) and here by “role.” Here Peter is taking on the role of shepherding the sheep.

But before this new role is given to Peter he is asked three times by Jesus, “Do you love me?” And the first time Jesus asks, “Do you love me more than these?” If “these” refers to the other disciples who did not recognize Jesus in the meal and seem to have now disappeared from the scene, then we are reminded of the boast of Peter at the Last Supper when Jesus warns them about not being able to follow him to the cross and Peter says, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Peter seems to remember the threefold denial of Jesus and makes just a simple personal affirmation, “You know that I love you.”

There is no doubt here that the threefold questioning about Peter’s love is to be seen in contrast to his threefold denial of Jesus. Note that there are only two places in the Gospels where there is a charcoal fire, here, and in the scene where Peter denies Jesus. It is pretty standard to think that Jesus is here forgiving Peter for his denial and challenging him to take on a new role in the community as shepherd or pastor of the sheep.

There is some concern here for the fact that Jesus in John 10 claimed to be the model Shepherd. Is this a partitioning of the power of Jesus? It seems that Jesus is sharing that power with Peter here for the sake of the unity of church. Without human leaders the community would tend to split up on its own. But there is a qualification for those who are given this ministry as shepherd; they must first show that they love Jesus. And that may even mean laying down their life for him and for his sheep. And in a time when many desire this particular role, not all are capable of this kind of courage in loving Jesus and his sheep. This also implies that the sheep still ultimately belong to Jesus, they are not Peter’s or anyone else’s. This is indicated in Jesus’ responses to Peter, “feed my lambs,...feed my sheep.”

This authority as shepherd is very little about ruling over the people, as this was not what Jesus was about. The authority is to pasture the sheep, know them personally, and lay down his life for the sheep.
Jesus concludes the questioning with a reminder to Peter that he has failed to lay down his life once, but there will come a time when he will be required to lay down his life for his sheep. Jesus refers to the kind of death by which Peter will glorify God in Peter’s own crucifixion. Jesus even concludes with the simple phrase, “follow me.” Peter is challenged to follow Jesus this time to the cross because the demonstration of his love for Jesus is the key to his shepherding more so than any power over the sheep.

**JOHN 21:20-24 Jesus and the Beloved Disciple**

Having just been commissioned by Jesus as shepherd of the flock and having been forgiven for his threefold denial of Jesus, Peter asks, “what about him?” The Beloved Disciple is identified here as the one who leaned against the chest of Jesus at the Last Supper, he is also the one who sees and believes at the empty tomb on Easter morning. Jesus complicates it all by saying “what if I want him to remain until I come back.” In John’s Gospel where everything seems to have a double meaning, the same may be true here of Jesus’ response. The disciples seem to think that it means the Beloved Disciple will not die before Jesus comes back. But it is thought that Peter may have the role of authority, still there will be others, like the Beloved Disciple who are model disciples, who love Jesus and whom Jesus loves in return, even though they have no role or authority in the community or the church. These are the kinds of disciples who will remain until the end. They will be the believing community of Christians who remain until Jesus comes again.

The Beloved Disciple will not have a designated role in the church or some element of authority, but the faith and love of these beloved disciples will be those who are loved by Jesus because of the way they demonstrate that love day by day in how they live the Gospel.

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"What if I want him to remain until I come?"

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I share with you a reflection on Chapter 21 of John’s Gospel that was shared with me several years ago but made tremendous sense to me then and now.

**A SACRAMENTAL REFLECTION ON JOHN 21**

This story might be seen as the way in which we become members of the catholic church community. It provides a framework for understanding the sacraments we use to initiate people into the church community: Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation.

As this story begins, we need to remember that Jesus has died and risen from the dead. He has appeared to his disciples locked in the upper room and now he appears to them on the shore of the lake.

Sin, alienation, chaos – locked in the upper room, returned to their former way of life (fishing). Trauma of their loss has sent them to return to their former ways of life – road to Emmaus, fishing on the lake.

DAWN – the story begins at the time halfway between light and darkness. Between seeing and not seeing. Jesus appears to them and asks them what they have caught – nothing. Their efforts have been fruitless in returning to their old ways of life. Jesus tells them to cast their nets off the other side. They make a great catch – abundance. Following the ways of Jesus leads to the fullness of life.

Peter jumps in the water. Why? The only way to Jesus is through water – baptism. It is our entry into his life – cleansed of sin, alienation, chaos. It is our way of changing nothing into great abundance. It is moving from our old life of sin to a new life of fulfillment, joy and happiness. Jesus invites his disciples, and us, to leave behind our chaos, regrets and alienation – actually, to allow Jesus to heal it. And the more we see this healing, the more we want to share it with others.
Peter becomes the prototype, the example, of how people enter the community – through baptism.

For the disciples it means not staying in the upper room or returning to their former way of life but they see once again how Jesus has healed their chaos, alienation and shame, and they begin to believe in him in such a way that they also begin to proclaim it.

BREAD AND FISH – On the shore they find Jesus sharing with them a meal of bread and fish.

BREAD – Eucharist

FISH – Greek “Ichthus” symbol of the early Christian community.

John is saying that once you have been baptized you need to be part of a community that is fed and nourished by the Eucharist. Jesus invites us from the chaos, alienation, shame, poverty of the world into intimacy with him. It is only in sharing our lives with Jesus around the table, and him sharing his life with us, do we become fruitful. We become strengthened as individuals and as a community to begin to proclaim his message, by what we say and do. Like the disciples and the early church community, the Eucharist is our way to stay connected to Jesus and to the community.

CHARCOAL FIRE – There is only one other place where a charcoal fire is referred to in all the Scriptures – “Peter is warming himself by the charcoal fire” as he denies three times that he knows Jesus. Jesus invites Peter back to that moment of his shame and now it becomes a place of honor. This becomes the place where Peter realizes his sin and is forgiven by Jesus. It is not to humiliate Peter but to empower him to lead the church community. Peter and Jesus go off by themselves to celebrate this sacrament of reconciliation. Three times Jesus asks him “Do you love me?” Each one is a reminder of his three-fold betrayal.

RECONCILIATION – In this sacrament we are invited to acknowledge those moments when we have trusted too much in ourselves, been too concerned about what others say about us, where we have not been faithful to the life that Jesus gave us in baptism. We have been insufficient, not enough, less than we had hoped to be. Jesus then embraces us in this moment to be healed once again of the shame, sin, alienation, and chaos of our lives. Not to humiliate us, but for us to recognize the power we have been given by Jesus in our lives, how our lives can be so much more than our shame and our sin. Jesus empowers us to be more. Jesus heals our past and propels us into the future.

CONFIRMATION – Jesus strengthens Peter’s ability to listen to him.

Confirmation strengthens our ability to listen to Jesus’ invitation into intimacy with him. That we have overcome our sin, alienation and now want to follow him more closely. The best way we can follow him is to listen to his direction. Jesus strengthened Peter’s ability to listen to him. Peter became more rooted in what his mission in life really was, his ability to discern where he was going, and his ability to internalize God’s call. Jesus invites us out of the chaos and alienation of our lives and into the abundance of intimacy with him. We are unafraid to face the world even when it opposes us.