

Today we will be reading a story about some very hard working people. A story of some very hard working people who find failure in what they do. We will be reading from chapter 21 of John but if you read chapter 20 you would think that the story would end there.

In chapter 20, we read of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. We read that story on Easter Sunday. The chapter then proceeds into Jesus appearing to the disciples as they have gathered after the crucifixion. Thomas isn't there so Jesus later appears to Thomas who had his doubts about the presence of Jesus.

And then chapter 20 ends with these words, read **John 20:30-31**.

If we were reading this story for the first time we would expect to close the book at that point. But the gospel of John has an add on if you will. It is as if what we are about to read was added to the gospel of John later on. In fact, that is the conclusion drawn by many scholars who study the Bible. Many folks who study the Bible believe that what we are about to read was added later and by another author.

This text which we are about to read has a connection to another story in the Bible. We are going to be reading this story of Jesus calling his disciples again after his death and resurrection. You may catch a glimpse of another story found in Luke's gospel. In the early part of Luke's telling of the life of Jesus, in Luke 5, Jesus comes upon James, John, and Simon Peter who are fishing. They have caught nothing at the point when Jesus approaches them.

Interesting fact that I discovered this week. In the four gospels, whenever we read stories of Jesus' disciples fishing without him present, they always catch the same amount of fish. And how much fish do they catch without Jesus? None.

In Luke's story, Jesus tells them to go out farther and to cast their nets again. They do. With the guidance of Jesus they then catch lots of fish. Jesus then invites them to come and follow him and fish for people.

Keeping that story from Luke in mind told when Jesus was beginning his ministry, let us listen now to this story which comes at the end of John's gospel.

Read John 21: 1-19

The gospels record various reactions of people when they encounter the empty tomb. In the gospel of Mark, the women flee in terror. In Matthew, the women worship at the feet of the risen Lord. In Luke, the women run to tell the disciples what they had seen. In John, we have a foot race between Simon Peter and the beloved disciple that some think is John. Then, after Simon Peter encounters the risen Lord he returns home. And then in the text we read today, Simon Peter says that he is going fishing.

Why do you think Simon Peter goes home after he encounters the empty tomb? Why does he seek to go fishing after encountering the risen Lord?

The gospels do not tell us. We can only speculate. But after encountering the risen Lord Simon Peter goes fishing. Now Simon Peter going fishing is not like Opie going fishing with his dad Andy Taylor in Mayberry at the pond. Fishing was Peter's livelihood. Fishing was hard work. Fishing was the way he supported his family. Peter encounters Jesus and he goes home and then he goes back to work.

But the fish are not biting that night. Actually they used nets. But no matter how hard he works, he is unsuccessful. He fishes through the night and catches nothing. Just like in that story I referred to earlier when the disciples fish and catch nothing until Jesus tells them to go out deeper. No matter how hard Peter fishes, he is unable to catch any fish. Peter works hard and Peter fails.

But isn't that the way that many of us are. Many of us think that living out our Christian faith is about working harder and harder and harder. We volunteer at the church in lots of ways and we can never seem to say "no" to any volunteer opportunity. If we just work hard enough then we will be justified.

Or we think to ourself, "if I just do lots and lots of good things for other people then they will like me and, therefore, God will be pleased with me." Like Simon Peter, we try to keep working and working harder in the hope that this will grant us some sense of satisfaction and sense of personal salvation.

But in the story that we have just read, it doesn't matter how hard Simon Peter works. No matter how hard he works through the night he still has the same result. No fish caught. Failure.

So in this point of failure, what happens next? At this point of failure, Jesus appears to them on the seashore. The disciples are working so hard they do not recognize that it is Jesus on the seashore. Jesus guides them to cast their net to the other side. They cast their net to the other side of the boat. After following Jesus' instructions, they catch so many fish they cannot even haul their entire catch into the boat.

But then the gospel writer John tells us something that is kind of embarrassing for us 21st century readers. We find out at this point that Simon Peter has been naked while he was fishing. Now, I am no fisherman, but if some of ya'll invited me to go fishing with ya'll I would say "yes." However, if you told me that you were going to be naked while you fished I probably would have second thoughts about your offer. Nude fishing just is not my idea of relaxation. Maybe it is for others, I don't know.

I was also intrigued to look at the picture from the children's Bible. In the children's Bible, Peter has clothes on.

But we are told that Peter has been naked. But then the text says that when he realizes that Jesus is in his midst, he wants to cover up again. Why is that? Why does Peter feel a need to cover himself after being naked during this whole time? Could it be that he is embarrassed and still feeling extremely guilty for the ways he acted during the last hours of Jesus' life? Remember, Peter was the one who denied Jesus three times when he was asked about who Jesus was.

But Jesus doesn't seem concerned about whether or not Peter is clothed or not. Jesus invites Peter to come on shore and there he has a meal prepared for him already. Jesus invites Peter to bring his fish with him but Jesus has already prepared everything that Peter needs to be fed. Peter is invited to be with Jesus and he doesn't have to do any work to accept what Jesus has to offer.

Like I shared, some of us are working hard to prove ourselves worthy of acceptance. Maybe we feel that we have to be superlative in order to prove ourselves worthy of attention from our parents, siblings, spouse, or some other significant relationship in our life. We have some brokenness in our lives and we try to fix our brokenness by working harder and harder and harder. I certainly know what that feels like in my life. I deal with those issues of trying to work hard to prove yourself worthy to others.

But ultimately this is a story where all of that hard work that we are doing is not gaining us anything in the end. No matter how hard we work to prove ourselves worthy, all of our hard work is proving futile.

Instead of trying to work harder and harder and harder to gain acceptance from others, we are invited in this story to bring whatever we have achieved and earned and come and eat with the risen Lord. He has already provided us everything that we need.

We do not need to work hard and earn anything else. He has everything waiting for us if we simply come. We do not have to throw anything away. We can keep our accomplishments. We can keep our awards. We can keep whatever you look to as a sign of your success.

But all of those things are not as important as coming to the fire and accepting what Jesus has to offer. He welcomes us and he feeds us what we need.

Success or failure is not what seems important to him.

Being in relationship with him and accepting his grace seems to be all that is important. AMEN.

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Prayer of Confession

We sing loud songs to you, Precious God, trusting they will drown out our mean-spirited murmurs about those around us. We hope you will turn a blind eye to our behaviors, while we imprison our families and friends with impossible expectations. We pull a muscle stretching to pat our selves on the back, but our attitudes and actions towards the poor and outcast of the world reveal we are not worthy to be called your children.

You never give up on us, Healing God. You are quick to forgive us, and quicker to offer us ways to share your name with everyone we meet. As you continue to be loving and affirming towards us, let us go to share the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Here these prayers that we offer as our movement toward reconciliation.

Prayers of the People

O God, your Son remained with his disciples after his resurrection, teaching them to love all people as neighbors.

As his disciples in this age, we offer our prayers on behalf of the universe in which we are privileged to live and our neighbors with whom we share it.

Open our hearts, O God, to your power moving around us and between us and within us, until your glory is revealed in our love of both friend and enemy, in communities transformed by justice and compassion, and in the healing of all that is broken.

Many of us here are trying to earn our salvation by working harder and harder. Help us to accept your grace. Teach us to see ourselves in the way that you see us, as beautiful creatures that you call very good.