



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Of Fish, Fires, and Faith

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

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Easter 3 (Year C)

**John 21:1-19, 25**

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*After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.*

*When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."*

*But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

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Have you ever heard someone delivering a speech (or a sermon) who got to what you thought was the perfect ending—only the person speaking didn't stop? I know that's a risky question to ask—since I'm now speaking before you—and you've probably heard me do that more times than I'd care to know. Who knows? You may even decide that I will do that very thing before this sermon is finished. But I risk the question this morning, because I think it helps us to make sense of this chapter of John's Gospel.

This chapter—the final chapter in the Gospel of John—comes immediately after what sounds for all the world like a final chapter of his gospel. Chapter 20 contains John's account of the resurrection, Jesus' appearance to Mary, who declares what John wants all of us to say—"I have seen the Lord"—and then, John tells us how Jesus showed up on that first Easter evening and entered the locked room where the disciples were gathered and breathed upon them and offered them peace. Perhaps you remember that Thomas missed it, and he was slow to believe, so Jesus shows up again and even Thomas comes to believe.

That's when the author of John—at the end of chapter 20—starts to sound like he's wrapping things up. Here's what he wrote: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

Doesn't that sound like the perfect ending to his story? But it's clear that the author of John struggled with a deeper question, namely, how can a Gospel possibly come to a close? And so we have chapter 21, which, in a tremendously helpful essay, my former professor Tom Long notes is a chapter that seems like the "Extra Features" or even the "Deleted Scenes" section on a movie DVD, more of a curiosity and an afterthought than a required part of the story. (The essay by Tom Long is contained in the Easter 2010 volume of the *Journal for Preachers*, and is entitled "Easter—the Extra Scenes?" Quotes which follow in this sermon are from Professor Long, but even those places not directly quoted stem from his thought and words.)

But in John's Gospel, there's always more than meets the eye, and that's clearly the case here. So why would the author of John's Gospel have two endings?

First, let's think about how stories typically begin and end. Stories get going only when something *happens*. In other words, Seinfeld's series about nothing notwithstanding, stories begin only when normal life is disrupted. A stranger comes to town. They run out of wine at the wedding. A child disappears in a crowd. In some way, there is a disruption to the normal flow of life. Something happens, and that's when a story begins.

So if stories typically begin with a disruption, they often end by that disruption's

resolution—by the return to life as normal. The stranger becomes a friend. The water is turned to wine. The child is found and returned to greatly relieved parents. The End. The houselights come up; we can throw our empty popcorn boxes in the trash and leave the theater. The beginning of a story breaks the circle; the end of the story closes the circle again.

But as common as that story-telling truth is, there is a certain artificiality about it, isn't there? When was the last time your real life was like that? The circular ending of a story is what has been called "a welcome fiction," but even though we welcome its completeness, it is nonetheless a fiction. Literary scholars tell us that we like this kind of ending because it resolves life, which is something that doesn't happen for most of us. While we often leave the theater with some lingering questions, we are most often satisfied by this "failure of continuation," because it enables to do precisely one thing: to expect nothing.

That's the key to those neat stories, isn't it? The expectation of nothing. Certain kinds of stories come to an end when we have the sense that nothing else needs to happen. The story is over, done, finished.

Now imagine for a moment if the chapter we read from John's Gospel today didn't exist. In other words, what if chapter 20 really did end the Gospel? If it did, then we might get the idea that the Gospel is one of those stories that is finished on the last page, one that comes to a static conclusion.

Think about it. Taken by itself, chapter 20 is a kind of circular ending. In John's Prologue, the Word came from God and became flesh in Jesus Christ, and now at the end, the Word returns to the God. In the beginning of the story, the reader was told that Jesus came so that 'all might believe,' and now at the end of the story, the mission is accomplished as Mary, the disciples, the hesitant Thomas, and countless others—including presumably the reader, all 'believe.'" Roll the credits. The Jesus story has come to a happy ending. Nothing else needs to happen.

But there's the problem. To imagine the story of Jesus as finished, as a completed circle, as a story that ends with "the expectation of nothing" is to horribly misunderstand the gospel. After all, the story of Jesus is a story of a never-ending disruption to life as normal.

And that brings us to the power of the second ending of John's Gospel in chapter 21. If chapter 20 offers us a type of closure—and ending of the story—then chapter 21 comes to us with another word. This is the anti-closure chapter that makes it clear that the Easter stories John tells in chapter 20 do not bring an end to the story of Jesus at all, but instead they throw believers into an open future, into a world that I like to say is teeming with resurrection, into a world that is continually being disrupted by the presence of the risen Christ. Rather than a story with the too-neat resolution of an ending in which the bow has been neatly tied and nothing else needs to happen, the Jesus story never ends, which means that something truly surprising and mind-blowing can be expected at every bend in the road.

So when chapter 21—the anti-closure chapter begins—we see a small group of disciples standing beside the sea of Tiberias—the place where it all began. And, for whatever

reason, Peter declares, “I’m going fishing,” and those gathered with him decide to go along. One thing’s clear: they remain wholly uninspired by the possibly and power of the resurrection. In a way, they are heading back to work without hope, and they are fishing in what appears to be an empty lake. They are, it appears, caught in a story that has already ended, and when their nets come up empty they are not surprised, because they have reached the end of the story and expect nothing.

But John 21 disrupts all life stories that have closed too soon with the presence of the risen Christ, who opens to us a never-ending kingdom future. When the unknown stranger calls to them from the shore, inviting them to cast their nets on the other side, their nets turned from empty to bursting with abundance. They caught 153 fish, and their nets—and their hearts—were full.

This is an Easter moment that forms not closure, not the end of the story, but continual openness to the surprises of God, which creates a stance of constant watchfulness and hope. You see, in a world that is teeming with resurrection, where the risen Christ is present, the future leans toward God and things happen. “Who knows, in other words, when a long and seemingly wasted night is but a prelude to a morning of abundance, when a dark world may be suddenly invaded by the bright and joyful light of Easter?”

Such a world requires discernment and action. We have to pay attention, and we have to learn to recognize the risen Lord standing on the shoreline of our lives and then we have to respond to his voice which calls to us.

But after the fish have been hauled ashore, there is the fire. The author of John pays such attention to detail, and when he tells us that Jesus had made a charcoal fire there on the beach, we can see it. But perhaps you see another charcoal fire from earlier in John’s Gospel. It was around that earlier charcoal fire, John tells us, that Peter denied Jesus three times. And now in chapter 21, around this charcoal fire, Peter—who had closed himself off from the story of Jesus’ future—is now invited back in. When Jesus asked Peter if he loved him “more than these,” it was not a question about affection, but citizenship. “Peter, which charcoal fire to you choose? Which world do you truly love? Do you love the world dominated by tyrants, fear, and death, or do you love the world disclosed by Easter where death, fear, and tyranny have been vanquished? Which do you love?”

In his exchange with Peter, Jesus is inviting him into a future with Jesus, a future filled with resurrection hope and mission, and Peter is invited to follow Jesus there.

As I’ve said, chapter 21 of John’s Gospel doesn’t provide us with closure. No, it opens us to a world literally teeming with resurrection. And, because John wants us to know something about what that world is like, chapter 21 overflows with abundance. As someone put it, what we have here is nothing less than “an archive of excess.”

Remember, the disciples didn’t just catch only small fish—but large ones—and not just a few, but 153 of them. “Normally nets would break under such a load, but not in John 21; on the other side of Easter, the net holds strong. Jesus has a breakfast of fish waiting, even before the disciples come ashore with the catch, and bread that materializes from...where? The bread of heaven? In other words, this is a narrative of excess, a story of an Easter Jesus who will not allow the narrative of God and the world to come to an artificial, status quo ending, a Jesus who keeps calling, and feeding, and loving, and for-

giving, and filling the world with wonder and grace, so much so that the world would run out of paper before it could all be written down. An archive of excess.”

As I’ve mentioned, I was greatly helped in this sermon by the essay written by one of my former professors, Tom Long, and I want to share now how he chose to end it.

There is no easy way to tell the story, so I’ll let Tom tell it in his own words. He writes:

“While I was working on this essay, my mother was quietly dying in hospice care. We gathered daily at her bedside, (touching) her tenderly, telling her over and over of our love. We cracked jokes and retold old family stories. We sang hymns, prayed, and read psalms to her. She responded as best she could, smiling faintly at the stories and jokes, telling us she loved us, too....”

“Almost every day she would beckon one of us close to her face and mouth with the words, ‘I’m hungry.’ She had a feeding tube, and the nurses were giving her all of the broth...her frail and failing system could handle, but still she said, day after day, ‘I’m hungry.’ This was quite troubling to us, even though the hospice staff assured us that her body, which was gradually shutting down, could no longer feel ordinary physical hunger pangs. Once, near the end, I came into her room and found her restless.

“‘What’s wrong?’ I asked. ‘Are you hungry?’”

“‘Very,’ she whispered. I felt helpless, not knowing what to do. I tried to feed her some soft food; she took a few small bites and then shook her head. No more. Slowly it dawned on me. ‘I’m hungry’ was her way of describing the totality of her circumstance. She was not asking for food; she was saying that everything was slipping away, her personal history was closing down, coming to an end. Her days of breath and food and light and family and the touch of love were ebbing, and she was hungry, hungry for more, hungry for the life being taken away from her...*very* hungry.”

“Early on a Thursday morning, the powers of death, as the old hymn puts it, did their worst, and she was gone. A week or so after her death and funeral, I tried to resume normal activities, and I went back to work on this essay, went back to John 21. Suddenly I saw there with new clarity—this time for my mother, this time for myself—what this gospel of ‘excess’ is about. I saw the power and promise of this story that undermines closure, this gospel of unceasing abundance that will not allow itself to be resolved by returning to the world that once was. I saw that the reason why the world could not hold the books telling of Jesus’ deeds is that Jesus keeps on doing them, doing them ceaselessly, doing them every day, doing them in our lives. I had stood beside my mother’s grave ‘in sure and certain hope of the resurrection,’ but now I could see it more clearly, could see my mother plunging into the waters of death and coming up on that distant shore, where Jesus is waiting with a charcoal fire and fish and bread, waiting with the abundance of new life.”

“‘Are you hungry?’ I hear him saying.”

“‘Very,’ my mother surely responded. ‘Very.’”

Chapter 21 invites us into a world of fish and fires, but ultimately faith. The story of Jesus, you see, isn’t finished. He is still here in the midst of life, calling us by name, overwhelming us with abundance, and inviting us to follow him, and to feast with him not only around charcoal fires, but in the very kingdom heaven.