

John 21:1-19

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, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. 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 and 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.'

“Expect the Unexpected!” (John 21:1-19) Easter 3, April 18, 2010

[Takes a photograph] Bet you didn't expect that, did you? Flash photography in church. From the pulpit. By me. Life is full of surprises! Little ones and big ones, too. But that in itself should be no surprise. After all, life was created by a God of surprises, a God who delights in doing the unexpected – which is why the better you get to know God, the more you learn to expect the unexpected.

Or at least, you should. For think of all the examples we have in the Bible. Like Abraham and Sarah. Just when they felt sure they would never be parents, much less parents of a great nation – surprise! – along came little Isaac, and with him, the promise got rolling. Or take Joseph. Just when he thought he'd spend the rest of his life in jail doing time for a crime he didn't commit – surprise! – God not only released him but raised him to great power. Or take Moses. Just when he thought he'd spend his golden years herding sheep in the wilderness – surprise! – God told him not to plan on retiring just yet. God had another "little" job for Moses: delivering the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and leading them to the Promised Land. So you see what I mean! With God, there's no "same old/same old." With God, there's no need to stay stuck in a rut. However bad things may seem, no situation is hopeless. However good things may seem, God can make them even better! He *is* a God of surprises, and because He is, it's always wise to expect the unexpected!

I'm sure that's what Peter would tell us after his experience in today's Gospel. In fact, let's imagine that he could tell us. Personally. In his own words.

No doubt, he'd begin: *Looking back, I don't know what I was thinking – going fishing after all that happened on Easter. Maybe I thought: "Well, that's it. After this roller coaster ride of following Jesus, He's done what He came to do. He's atoned for sin, conquered death, finished the work of salvation. Everything's been taken care of. Now life can go back to normal." And what was normal? For me, it was fishing. It could be, too, that after the way I denied Jesus, I figured He wouldn't want anything more to do with me, so like it or not, my life would have to go back to normal – back to the way it was before I met Jesus – which, again, for me, meant fishing. At any rate, that's what I went off to do, little knowing what a surprise Jesus had in mind for me!*

Even now, I can't believe how well He set things up. That morning, it was like every detail was meant to remind me of who Jesus is and what He can do in my life if I let Him. First, there was that huge haul of fish. Talk about déjà vu! The same thing happened the very first time I met Jesus. I had spent the whole night fishing and caught nothing – just like this night. Then Jesus told me to let down my nets again for a catch – just like this night. I was skeptical, of course. Very skeptical. But when I obeyed Him,

guess what? A huge haul of fish – just like this night. That was when I first began to realize who Jesus was and what He could do in my life if I'd let Him. And that was when Jesus called me to follow Him – told me my new job would be outreach, sharing the Gospel; my new job would be fishing for people.

But this particular morning after Easter, the question was Did I still have the job? I didn't think so. Sure, Jesus repeated the miracle He used to call me into His service, but I was still sure I'd been fired. How could I not be? Far from proclaiming Jesus, I had denied Him. Far from defending Jesus, I had run away. I was sure I'd been fired. But...with Jesus you learn to expect the unexpected. You learn to focus on Who He is and what He can do in your life if you let Him. So was I fired? Well, let me just tell you the rest of what happened that morning.

When I realized it was Jesus on the beach, I jumped out of the boat and swam to shore. The surprises just kept coming. First, Jesus served me breakfast. Fish and loaves. You know what that reminded me of! The time we were out in the wilderness. Five thousand people and nothing to serve them but two fish and five loaves. Jesus said it would be enough. I was skeptical. Jesus said He would make it enough. Still skeptical. But when I obeyed Him, guess what? There was enough and more than enough. Twelve baskets of leftovers. Another reminder of who Jesus is and what He can do if I let Him.

But as the Lord handed me my breakfast, I looked down and saw another reminder: a charcoal fire. That might not mean much to you, but it was a charcoal fire just like the one that had been burning in the high priest's courtyard the night Jesus was arrested. That was when I had denied Jesus. Right there, warming my hands over the charcoal fire. And I didn't just deny Him once or twice; I denied Him three times. Oh, this seemed proof positive. I was so fired! Jesus had to be done with me. After all, what normal person would keep a follower like me who had failed Him so miserably?

And do you know what was even worse? He asked me after breakfast, **“Do you love me?”** I figured: He must think I don't. Why would He think otherwise – even though I did and do and always will. Three times He asked, **“Do you love me?”** And each time, I told Him I did. But what was up with that? At first, I wondered if he was trying to humiliate me. Trying to rub my nose in my shame. But then I thought: Maybe this is His way of forgiving me – giving me a chance to apologize three times for three denials. Finally, I realized He was doing something even greater. He was helping me realize the truth: I really do love Him! And even after letting Him down so badly, that was all that mattered to Jesus. Not only was I forgiven, not only did I still have my job, He planned a bigger and better job for me. Talk about a surprise! And there on that beach one

*morning after Easter, I really got it – Who Jesus is and what He can do in my life if I let Him. I don't need to be perfect. Failures can be forgiven. I don't need to do things on my own. Weaknesses can be overcome. I just need to love Him – love Him enough to trust Him, depend on Him, yield to Him. He'll take care of the rest. Yes, that morning I really got it, and once I did, Jesus said, “**Follow Me.**”*

No doubt, that's what Peter would tell us. And my friends, you see what I mean! With God, expect the unexpected! Our God is a God of surprises! And what was true back then for Peter is true for us today. What matters to the Lord is that we love Him – love Him enough to trust Him, depend on Him, yield to Him. He will take care of the rest. Because of who Jesus is, there's no end to what He can do in our lives if we let Him! And this particular morning after Easter, He invites us to let Him. He says to us as He did to Peter, “**Follow Me.**”

Where will He lead us? There's no telling – anymore that there was that morning when Peter started a new chapter in His life. But one thing was sure: right when Peter thought the adventure was over, God had something greater in mind for him. Surprise! The rest of his life turned out to be the best of his life! And why should it be any different for you and me – for you and me as individuals; for you and me as a congregation. The past few months, we've been on a roller coaster ride of our own following Jesus. Unlike Peter, we've stayed faithful. Unlike Peter, we've stood up for the Lord. But it's been tough on us. The adventure has worn us out. And now that the dust has settled some, it would be easy to think: *Now we can get back to normal. This is how things are going to be for the foreseeable future.* Yes, that would be easy to think. And it would be wrong! In fact, as of today something very new begins!

Today the risen Lord asks us: People of Richland Lutheran, “**do you love Me?**” And we certainly do! Today the risen Lord says: “**Follow Me.**” And we certainly will! That means: today the “same old/same old” is over. Today we start a new chapter in our history. Today we look ahead with great anticipation to the plans God has in mind for us – plans for our welfare and not for harm, to give us a future with hope. Do we feel weak? Doesn't matter. His grace will be sufficient for us; His power is made perfect in weakness! Do we feel limited? Doesn't matter. He is “**able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine!**” The rest of our life can be the best of our life, because what matters is Who Jesus is. What matters is what He can do in our lives if we love Him enough to let Him. And as of today, more than ever before, we will let Him – let Him surprise us, transform us, work in us and through us to carry out His mission – and as we do, we will expect the unexpected!

I mean, think what He's already done here! Those of you were around here 60-plus years ago, when just a handful started worshiping in a Grange Hall, did you expect God to build a congregation this big and this active? God is a God of surprises! Those of you who were around here in 1967, when we dedicated this sanctuary, did you have any idea how much more we would go on to do – TV ministry, the chaplaincy, hospice, Luther Senior Center, Tri-Cities Terraces? God is a God of surprises! And I'm sure He's still got quite a few more up his sleeve! There's no telling what He still has in mind! Five, ten years from now – when I'm older and grayer and fatter than I am today – I look forward to looking back on how God carried out His plans here. I'm sure we all look forward to that! And any rate, it begin today. Let Peter's words inspire our words. Let Peter's attitude inspire our attitude. *Lord, we love you! Lord, we follow you! Lord, we put ourselves at Your disposal. Surprise us, Lord! Surprise us beyond our wildest imaginations. We expect the unexpected! Amen.*