

May 1, 2021 - THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

“You Are My Witnesses” - John 21: 1-19

One of the common critiques of our belief about Jesus’ resurrection is that it was only a vision or a hallucination or at most a ghost. What does the account in our gospel lesson say about that? Jesus made sure the disciples knew that His resurrection was real. He was physically real. He made a fire. He roasted fish. He invited them to breakfast. He ate right in front of them. He was not a ghost or a vision or a hallucination. They recognized Him. “They knew it was the Lord.”

He was resurrected – just as they would be one day. He had paid the price for all their sin on the cross, and heaven was open, to live forever with Him, as He is, in a real and glorified body like His. What a glorious promise also to all of us who die in Him. We will know Him as He is. We will be like Him forever. We can’t wait.

However, I’d like to begin by drawing our attention to the very beginning of our narrative. Our Gospel reading begins with a very ordinary word from Simon Peter: “I am going fishing.” He was a fisherman, so on the face of it this statement is no surprise. However, there is a big problem here. When Jesus called him to be His disciple, what had He told him?: “From now on, you will be a fisher of men.”

Peter had been a witness of Jesus’ resurrection. Luke recorded how Jesus had made it clear to Peter and the others: “You are witnesses of these things.” A witness has a responsibility. If you have seen an accident or a crime, you have a responsibility. Only you can testify to the truth of what happened. It may be uncomfortable to step forward and enter the fray. But if we don’t, how will the truth be known? Even today, we are legally accountable to testify to what we have heard and seen.

Jesus, no doubt, spoke those words, then, with the emphasis on the word “witness;” “You are WITNESSES.” The truth of who I am, of what I have done, the spread of this eternal news depends on you. You and you alone are the crucial witnesses of these things.” You are responsible. You are accountable. You are not ignorant like everybody else. You know the truth, and the truth depends on you stepping up and stepping out.

Stop here a moment because that is true of us yet today. We believers – and we alone – know the truth about Jesus. We know that He was more than a good guy, a fine teacher of morality, as many think. We know the truth about Who Jesus is and what He came to do for the salvation of humankind. We “are WITNESSES of these things.” If we don’t testify to this truth, no one will know.

Peter went fishing. He just carried on with his usual life. Was he going to ignore his huge responsibility, his crucial role in the salvation of the world? And what about us? We need to go fishing, to carry on with our normal life. But we also have a huge responsibility in the salvation of the world. We need to remember and act how we are witnesses of these things. We need to find occasions when we can speak up. We cannot be afraid. We too need to be reminded that we are “fishers of men.”

How does Jesus call Peter and the others back to their status as witnesses? You remember when Peter first realized Who Jesus is, when He first fell at Jesus’ feet, when he first heard Jesus’ call to follow Him, when Jesus first called him to be a fisher of men? It had come three years earlier when He and the others were out fishing all night, not catching a thing.

Just like this time. What did Jesus do then? He told them to then also to cast their nets once more, just as He did now in this post-resurrection event. To their amazement, their nets were filled to breaking at that time, and Peter recognized Jesus as the Lord.

No doubt, Jesus used this event to remind Peter and the others of their calling, to remind them of Who He is. In this event, it is John who first recalls and shouts "It is the Lord!" There's a nice little touch here in John's account. As a fisherman in the waves and the work, Peter was stripped to his loincloth. When John pointed out that this was the resurrected Lord on the shore, he first put on his tunic before he jumped into the sea, just as he did the first time and waded to Jesus. When you come into the presence of the Lord, you want to be dressed properly!

There are a couple more significant details in the account here that God has given us through John's writing. It is remarkable that John gives us the number of fish – large fish – that were in the once again bursting nets: 153. Presumably, the group had counted them so that they could divide the income. But they came up with 153, and John records this seemingly insignificant detail.

But it actually is a significant detail. John will be inspired to record this detail after Jesus' Ascension. At His Ascension, Jesus had once again reminded them that they were His witnesses, and where did He say they were to be His witnesses? The same place He had told them earlier: "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations." Now at His Ascension, Jesus repeats it: "You will be my witnesses ... to the end of the earth."

So what's the awareness and importance of the 153 large fish? That's how many different kinds of fish people at that time thought there were. What's the message now in that number? How many people are to be included in your witness, in the net of the church?: all the people in the world, all nations, to the ends of the earth. Some of the fish will be strange, but they must be included in the net. The net is for all, for all types.

And that's true yet today. The church is for all. Our witness is for all. It's also for people who are strange to us: The call to join in the church goes out to people who are strange to us, people who may make us feel uncomfortable, who are not like us in culture or dress or language or customs. Maybe they are women wearing a hijab over their heads. Maybe they are houseless who haven't had a bath in weeks. Maybe they are people with all kinds of tattoos, all kinds of habits that make us feel uncomfortable. But they are welcome. They are welcome into the net.

The church is for all, for all types. We are witnesses of Jesus. How will they know of the salvation and new life that is available in Him unless we carry out our responsibility of telling them, of inviting them?

What a privilege our Lord has given us. He has made us His own in Holy Baptism. He has put His seal upon us. When He called us, He promised us: "I will be with you to the end of the age. As I send you out as my witnesses, I am with you. Do not be afraid. I trust you. I need you. You are Mine. Invite them to come in, one and all, all 153 of them."