

Easter 3, 2013

John 21.1-19

The gospel of John, the most exalted gospel, should end with the story of Doubting Thomas, which we heard last week. When Jesus says, “put your fingers in the nail-prints and your hand in my side,” it is the most physically intimate moment in the New Testament. This is followed by the promise, “blessed are those who have never seen and yet believe.” This exalts us who are at some distance from the historical resurrection. The story ends, “there are other things that Jesus did; these are written that you may believe and have life in his name.” The End, curtain, applause.

The applause called forth this epilogue, chapter 21, which we heard at length just now. When compared to the rest of John, it is unexalted, prosaic, and substandard. And yet, there are some jewels of spiritual insight if you look hard. These are some that I noticed.

Setting. The action takes place in Galilee, where the disciples lived and worked before they met Jesus. It does not take place in the sacred space of Jerusalem, the place of Jesus’ passion. For us this means that Jesus is not confined to what we consider holy space; rather he comes to meet us where we are, in our ordinary activities. It is our job to open our eyes and recognize his unexpected appearances.

Cast of characters. Nearly always Jesus interacts with the Twelve. In special moments he singles out Peter, James, and John. In this chapter we have seven characters. Five are identified by name, including Nathanael, the loud-mouth who once asked, “can anything good come from Nazareth?” At the other end of the spectrum is “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” the one who understands Jesus as deeply as possible. In between are five who are not one thing or the other, maybe ambivalent in their faith. Two are unnamed. They probably represent you and me, with our ambivalence and neither/nor qualities. They have mental reservations but are included anyway.

Plot. I am not so interested in the sensational catch of fish, which comes in another form when Peter is first called. More interesting are the responses to it. Peter dives impetuously into the water, thoughtlessly leaving the net for others to drag in. In contrast, the beloved disciple doesn’t need to behave impetuously because he has the eyes of love. It is he that first recognizes Jesus. The eye of the heart see more than outward

eye. The eye of the heart stays open and watches when the space is empty. And so it is able to identify the Savior when his figure takes shape on the misty shore.

The first scene ends with that very odd sentence, “Now none of the disciples dared to ask, ‘who are you?’—they knew it was the Lord.” This suggests that spiritual encounter is not an easy or comfortable experience. On the one hand, Jesus sweetly says, “Come, have breakfast.” On the other, he is remote, not huggable. His presence is so awesome that the disciples dare not probe it. Even Nathanael, the loudmouth, even Thomas, who had that earlier intimacy, keep their mouths shut. There will be times when Jesus says, “touch me and see.” But there will also be times when Jesus stays in the background and won’t do it for us. We must learn to appreciate both experiences as times of connectedness and blessing.

Second scene: interrogation of Peter. I have never liked the emotionally harassing quality of this dialogue, “do you love me, do you love me, do you love me,” ending with Peter writhing like a worm on a hook. It is thought to be reparation for his three denials on the night of Jesus’ arrest, and gives the impression that God is after his pound of flesh for the various mistakes we are sure to make. It could be seen in more positive terms as Jesus’ effort to slow Peter down—to stop him from jumping in the water and neglecting the net. Real love requires such slowing-down. We are not so smooth in our first efforts, but that is no reason to give up. It is on the second or third or tenth try that we begin to figure things out, and it is worth the embarrassment of all those previous blunders.

Third scene: prophecy of Peter’s martyrdom. “You will be taken where you do not wish to go.” Grim thought. Yet accurate depiction of the negative obstacles that fall into our path. We can feel persecuted and trapped by such mishaps. Or is Jesus offering a liberating alternative? By connecting Peter’s defeat to Peter’s discipleship—this bad thing will happen to you but follow me anyway—is Jesus linking disappointment and victory in a way that is very alien to our usual thinking? Whether we suffer unjustly or whether we bring it on ourselves, it seems that pain always bears within itself the possibility of enlargement and transcendence. We do not come to this insight easily. We must stumble towards it gropingly towards it for a long time and in our own particular way. It is the sort of thing we must discover for ourselves, and are not granted in pre-

packaged form. It is of course the heart of the Christian message, that out of death comes life.

The ending of chapter 21 is not as theologically strong as the close of the Doubting Thomas story. But it is touching, especially considering the previous austerities (none of the disciples daring to ask; do you love me; you will go where you do not wish to go). “There are many other things that Jesus did. If they would be written down, I suppose the world itself could not contain the number of books which would have to be written.” All these books are our stories, each one precious, each one unique. It is good to think of our journey as the boat moving towards the shore, where in the mist Jesus awaits us.

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