

One hundred and fifty-three fish

John 21:1-19

April 29, 2001

You are a fisherman. It's what you know. It's what you do.

But some years back you left all that behind to become the disciple of a rabbi named Jesus. This man, Jesus, came to you one day and said to you, *Follow me*, and you did. It has been quite a journey -- you have been amazed by some of the things this man has done. You have been awed -- and bewildered -- by many of the things this man has said. You have grown to trust him, you have grown to put much hope in him, you have grown to love him.

Sometimes your very soul burns with passion because of him. When he speaks to you or to the crowds gathered around him, when he touches you or another beside you, God does not seem distant or vague anymore, but palpably close, right here ... around you, with you, in you.

Once when he asked you, *Who do you say I am?* you answered what you truly believed, *You are the Messiah!* That is what you know ... and yet, there is so much you do not know.

Now, more than ever, there is so much you don't know. Things somehow got complicated, tense, frightening. People, powerful people, were threatened by Jesus and they plotted against him. Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover anyway and brought the rest of you along. He came in spite of the risk, knowing well what awaited him in Jerusalem. And indeed, he was arrested and then everything ... everything came apart.

He was accused, he was defamed, he was ridiculed, he was abused. You followed, you watched, you listened -- even when all the others had scattered in fear -- but you were afraid, too. And your fear eventually betrayed you, your fear betrayed him. This man you followed, this man in whom you put your hope, this man you loved -- three times you betrayed him, three times you said, *I don't know him*.

He was tried, he was convicted, he was sentenced to die. On the eve of the Passover Sabbath he was led out of the city and crucified. He died and was buried in a freshly dug tomb.

But then, then you saw him. Two times you and the rest of his followers with you saw him. He came to you ... came to you in the room where you were gathered together, doing your best to stay out of the way of the authorities. He came to you and said, *Peace be with you*.

Yes, there is so much you don't understand, so much you don't know.

Last night you stood here with six friends. You stood here on the shore of Lake Tiberias, thinking about all the things you don't understand, wondering again about what you will do. And you said, *I'm going fishing ...*

You're still a fisherman. It's what you know. It's what you do. And your six companions said, *We're going with you*.

So you fished -- all night you fished -- but you caught nothing. Sometimes that happens, even to the best of fishermen. But then he called out from the beach. A man called out across the water: *Catch anything?*

Not a thing ...

Try the other side of the boat ...

Yeah right, you thought, but you tried it anyway. And the catch! The catch! The nets filled with fish! The thrill of the catch, the sudden excitement, the sudden realization ... it is the Lord!

One of your friends exclaimed, *It is the Lord!*, and you didn't hesitate, You grabbed your clothes, you jumped into the water and you swam to the beach. When the boat arrived, the one waiting on the beach said, *Bring the fish ...* and you did. You dragged the net to shore, the net filled with fish ... the net filled with one hundred and fifty-three fish!

Now why does the gospel writer make a point of reporting the number of fish? Why one hundred and fifty-three fish? It's a detail in the story that fascinates me.

I am not the first to be curious about this detail! There have been all kinds of explanations offered for the meaning of the 153 fish ...

- there were at the time 153 recognized species of fish ... so the catch represents all the different kinds of fish, meaning that Jesus enables his followers to catch all the different kinds of people

- there were 153 people ministered to by Jesus in the gospel of John

- Jesus lived for 12, 240 days (=80x153) ... or Jesus ministered for 918 days (=6x153)

- Jesus was the 77th generation from Adam, meaning that there are 76 generations of the human race before Jesus and there will be 76 generations after Jesus, totalling 153 generations ... so God does something extra specially good every 77th generation!

It gets better!

- the numerical value of Σίμων is 76, and the numerical value of ἰχθυσ is 77, 76+77=153 ... Peter/fish ... when Peter puts on his garment, he is putting on Christ, jumping in the water is his baptism, in baptism he becomes ἰχθυσ (fish) ... and ἰχθυσ is Jesus Christ ... Peter becomes one with Jesus Christ in baptism!

All this from one hundred and fifty-three fish! Why make it so complicated? Think about it! They were fishermen! Why would they have remembered that there were one hundred fifty-three fish? One hundred and fifty-three big ones!

They were fishermen! They would remember! When I go fishing with my brother-in-law in Canada I count the number of fish I catch! I remember where I caught the fish and what I caught them with and how many there were.

They remembered the catch. They remembered the meal of fish and bread. They remembered being with Jesus. The one hundred and fifty-three fish was a memorable detail in what was a memorable encounter, a memorable encounter with the resurrected Jesus ... an earthy, earthly encounter ... catching fish, eating fish and bread, talking with Jesus as the early morning waves off the lake beat against the shore.

The one hundred and fifty-three fish is a detail that reminds us of the meaning of resurrection. Jesus is raised a physical being, not a ghost or a spirit or an angel. This story is not about any heaven-sent vision, or supernatural spiritual encounter. The resurrected Jesus was there with them at the lakeshore, feeling the same wind against his cheeks, tasting the same fish, engaging his disciples in conversation.

The resurrection of Jesus fills us with hope for just this reason, because it is the demonstration of God's power to transform us here and now ... the demonstration of God's power to make old things new here and now -- in us and in our world ... God's power to bring new life out of what is dead here and now -- in us and in our world.

The living Jesus meets them, and once more, fills bodies and spirits with the goodness of God ... once more he feeds them, once more he heals their wounds.

Jesus speaks to you, Jesus singles you out, Jesus says to you, *Do you love me?*

Yes, Lord, you know that I love you ...

He asks you again, Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Yes, Lord, you know that I love you ...

Once more he asks, *Do you love me?* A third time he asks you and you remember ... you remember the three times you betrayed him and it hurts . You are filled with pain and with shame and grief, but you say once more what is true, *Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!*

And Jesus says, *Take care of my sheep ...* and he does not ask the question again.

This is what you know ... that Jesus does not doubt your love, that Jesus has given you the opportunity to undo each denial, one by one by one ... that Jesus has restored your dignity ... that Jesus has called you to take care of the people he dearly loves. Jesus has asked you to do this for him.

Follow me, he says once more ... and you do.

I am confident that this same Jesus who met seven of his followers on the shores of Lake Tiberias will also meet you where you are. I am confident that this same Jesus who firmly, but gently, probed the deep wounds in Peter's soul, will also address the wounds and frailties of your spirit, surely and tenderly. I am confident that this same Jesus who said to Peter, *Follow me*, will also invite you to follow.

This Jesus will come to you, not just here, in the sanctuary or Sunday School room and fellowship hall, but wherever you are engaged in your occupation, whereve you are engaged in the tasks and routines of your everyday life. He met seven fishermen down by the water ... and you? Where will Jesus meet you?