

## **The Circle of ~~Life... Death...~~ Forgiveness**

Nothing is the same forever, or so says modern science. That is, 98 percent of our bodies' atoms get replaced every year. *Resurrection* is another word for change, particularly for a certain kind of change: positive change that we are able to observe, to know it for what it is, only in the long run. In the short run, change often looks like death.

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Imagine if you will: the emotional roller-coaster of the remaining disciples, especially Simon Peter, on the evening our story begins for today.

The scene: by the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee, probably near the village of Capernaum, which was Jesus' base camp when he was doing ministry. Here we see Simon Peter, the rock, the disciple Jesus said was in charge while Jesus was gone – and the one who denied him three times before the alarm rooster went off.

With Simon Peter is Thomas, who had his moment in the spotlight in last week's reading from the Gospel of John. Doubting Thomas. With them is Nathanael, "can-anything-good-come-out-of-Nazareth"

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Nathanael. With Peter, Thomas, and Nathanael are the sons of Zebedee, James and John, the ones who argued over who would get to sit at Jesus' right hand and who would get to sit at his left hand. And two other players not to be named later. Is that you? Is it me?

Seven. Not twelve minus one. Seven. And the really skeptical, flawed, utterly human ones. Simon Peter, who always tried too hard to be the teacher's pet. That's me. Is it you too? Skeptical Nathanael. *Nazareth? Psht. One-donkey town.* I've been there and said that. James and John. *I want to sit on his right! No, I want to!* Any middle children in the house?

In the days after Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples were, shall we say, "actively grieving." If we remember Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and her stages of grief, these disciples are in the earliest stages: denial, anger, shock, doubt.

One of the reasons that we engage in the rituals of the church when someone dies, everything from bringing food to the house to having a committal at the graveside, is that when we are angry, shocked, and

unable to grasp the reality of death, these familiar patterns give you and me work to do that can lay the foundation for the healing that is to come. So these numb and dazed seven go to the familiar spot by the lake. And Simon Peter, who had been a fisherman before this Teacher came by and called to him, decides to go fishing.

Because when, in the aftermath of death, we feel the need to do something, in many cases what we reach for is something we can do without thinking. Something that the muscle memory will let us do.

What must be going on in Simon Peter's heart and mind right now? What's going on in yours? What's going on in mine?

*Jesus is gone. Yes, he appeared in that locked room, not a ghost – but he's still not here. And the very last words I said while the Teacher was alive was to deny, deny, deny.*

What else is there to do *except* to go fishing?

So they fish through the night.

*And of course they catch nothing. Great. I gotta get a new job and I've forgotten how to fish.*

What does the gospel say at this point?

*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.*

And so we return to the beginning. They are fishing. Someone they don't recognize addresses them with loving familiarity and tells them how to do their job. And in this moment on the Sea of Galilee, numb with grief, they somehow find themselves doing as he says. And the nets overflow with a ridiculous, extravagant abundance of fish.

And Simon Peter gets it.

He went in the empty tomb and looked around and heard what Mary Magdalene said and that didn't do the trick.

He saw Jesus appear in a locked room and breathe on them and say, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so send I you," and his broken heart still couldn't let his grieving mind process it.

And a compelling stranger calls to the boat from the shore and tells them how to fish, and the nets come up spilling over, and he gets it.

How many times does God guide and direct you and me over and over and over again? How many times does God keep using different

people and signs and dreams and metaphorical mallets over the head until we get it?

The answer is not necessarily three, or seven, or even forty-two. The answer is: *As many as it takes, for as long as it takes, for every moment we are breathing on this Earth and then forever.*

I love this story because of the completion of the circle it provides for Simon Peter and for all of the seven who are on the beach that morning: the awkward disciple, the one trying so hard that he often puts his foot in his mouth, and the disciple stuck for all time with the nickname of Doubting, and the disciple who, when first told about Jesus, scoffed and doubted, and the disciples who walked with Jesus and bickered over who got to sit where at the table – in heaven. And each one of them is you and is me. We return, in a very real narrative sense, to the beginning. And Jesus does what he knows he must do for Simon Peter, because he loves Simon Peter.

Three times Peter denied Jesus.

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And so here on the beach, Jesus, now that they see him for who he is, feeds them with, of course, loaves and fishes. He grills. He brings the fire of resurrection to the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

And three times, Jesus allows Simon Peter to declare his love for Jesus, for the Teacher. And three times, Jesus entrusts him with the most important job. And then, at the last, Jesus says to Simon Peter, “Follow me.”

God the Creator through Jesus the Incarnation will always guide the footsteps of you and me. God will continue to try to get us to hear the message. God will continue to entrust us with the work to which God has called us. And God will continue to forgive, not three times, not seven times, not seventy times seven. God will continue to forgive, as Jan Karon writes, *until heaven and then forever*.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. Amen.