

Sermon on John 21:1-14

by Pastor Alexander Mielke on April 13, 2008

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After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 3Simon 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. 4Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 6He 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. 7That 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 sea. 8But 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. 9When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12Jesus 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. 13Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Dear Congregation!

“Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach.” What a great image for Easter! One year ago, I was able to travel to Israel, so I can imagine it. The wide waters of the Sea of Genesaret, surrounded by the green, fertile hills of Galilee on the one side, by the stark, steeply rising mountains of the Golan Heights on the other side. And this wide water, which seemed so dark, impenetrable and threatening in the night, was then immersed in the first light rays of the rising sun, sparkling in rich colour hues of orange and red. And in the centre of this stands the resurrected Jesus in his full power, to banish the darkness of death; powerfully he takes away the shadows of fear and desperation, which torment us humans. Today, we are taken into this mighty Easter experience of the disciples.

1. The night is over – Jesus stands at the Shore of our Life.

It is during the night when Peter and his companions start to work. It is a very special moment when they do this. Even the names and the number of the disciples indicate this. Nathanael is with them. In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, he was mentioned, he was one of the first whom Jesus called; of him Jesus said, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile”. Thomas is also among them. In the Gospel of John he is quoted time and again asking probing questions and questions of doubt. And the sons of Zebedee, John and James go out to sea with Peter, they have always been his companions. With two others, whose names are not mentioned, there are altogether seven disciples. This significant number gives a sense already, that this trip has its special meaning. A long journey of Jesus with his disciples, which has had its beginning here at the Lake of Genesaret, which passed through many stages with questions and doubts, will now find its destination and its completion.

His disciples, however, do not appear to have any notion of this. When Peter says, “I am going fishing“, helplessness and dejection can be sensed in his words. He is no longer in Jerusalem, he has returned to his home. Their hopes had been destroyed; their story with Jesus seemed to have come to an end. So Peter had returned to the Sea of Genesaret, where he still had his old fishing boat. And now – because he does not know what else to do – he attempts to continue with his

former work, attempts to forget what he has experienced with Jesus, what hopes had excited him. A great darkness of resignation lies over this scene, when Peter and his companions go out to sea to fish.

In John 15 Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Peter experiences both: He can do nothing without Jesus. But with Jesus he bears much fruit.

First he tries to act without Jesus. An entire night he works with his companions, but totally in vain. They catch not a single fish in their nets. It is as if their lack of faith and their despondency paralyzes everything that they try to do, and therefore the only result is failure.

"Just after daybreak, Jesus stood at the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus." Unrecognized, Jesus comes to their side. "Children, have you no fish, have you?" All his care and love are contained in these words. "Cast the net to the right side of the boat!" – The disciples do what he says, even though they still do not understand what is happening here. But there is something to the sound of his voice that moves them to listen to this stranger.

And then there is success. The nets become so full of fish that they can barely pull nor hold them. And still, they understand nothing. Only one of them remembers, his favourite disciple, who is probably John. He remembers that it happened to Peter once before, at the time of his being called by Jesus, that Jesus, at the time, let him also experience such a miracle. And when John tells Peter, "It is the Lord!" – then his eyes are being opened. Peter puts on some clothes, jumps into the water and swims to the shore as fast as he can.

There are times, when night descends on our life. When failure depresses us, when we no longer have courage or strength, when we almost go on just automatically, but have no more hope and see no more meaning.

Christ is present also during these times. Even though our eyes do not see, even though we do not recognize him, even though we see only darkness around us – he

is standing at the shore of our life and cares for us. Christ is near us, even when doubts and dejection torture us. Sometimes, we can just hold out our empty hands to Jesus. And this is not too little for Christ. He comes to our side.

Trust in this. In the night, you will hear the familiar voice, “Do not be afraid!” In the darkness, the familiar face will appear, Jesus who cares for you. Easter, new life, new light – you may experience it again!

2. The Night is over - Jesus stands at the Shore of Death.

A large body of water in the night. How gloomy and impenetrable it appears. We only see the black gloss of the surface, we barely sense all that which is hiding in the deep. The huge body of water, the deep sea – in the religions and cultures of the world, this is again and again an image of death. The sea, which can destroy and engulf everything, which can drag down everything into its unfathomable depth – a big, frightening symbol of death.

The German television Pastor Jörg Zink points out that there is a very special connection between Jesus and the sea in the stories of the New Testament. Different from the great myths of religions and cultures. There, the sea stands for a large area, in which the individual person disappears. That can be frightening, when the stormy sea is representing the horrors of death. Or that can mean the hope for peace: Just as the streams and rivers flow into the huge ocean, just as many small water droplets are kept in the large sea, so my life will finally disappear into something bigger, find its last rest there.

It is different with Jesus. When a storm arises on the Sea of Genesaret and the fishing vessel of the disciples is tossed about like a nut shell – then Jesus rises and rebukes the storm and calms the raging sea. And Jesus does not sink into the waves of the water. No, there is the well-known scene, where Jesus walks on the water and Peter can even do the same. As long as he looks to Jesus, Peter can also walk across the water.

This is the great certainty of the Bible. We do not disappear into the sea of death. No, Easter means: We can walk on water, we are saved from perishing. In Isaiah 43 it says, "Fear not, I have called you by name, you are mine". It has a deep meaning that this word of the Bible is so closely connected with baptism. In God's promise, the water loses its threatening power, it cannot destroy our life. For God has called every one of us by name. We will not disappear nameless, like a tiny drop, into the sea of death. Our name will be kept; it is created for being eternally face to face with God and for the eternal communion with him. "Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach." The resurrected, who does not sink into the depth of the water, he is standing at the shore of death, he takes us by the hand and leads us across the depth of death to God's eternal kingdom.

3. The Night is over - Jesus stands at the Shore of the World.

In the Gospel of John there is a description of the suspenseful togetherness of Peter on the one side and the favourite disciple John on the other side, who is the chief witness of this gospel. So also here in chapter 21. Peter is the leader of the disciple group, he decides to go fishing during the night, and the others join him. John, however, recognizes the Lord. When Jesus stands at the shore, when the disciples make a big catch on his word, Peter understands not a thing at first. And then, we may see the narrator smiling, when he describes, what Peter does: Hastily he puts on his clothing, rashly he throws himself into the water; first he understands nothing, but then he wants to be with Jesus right away, faster than the other disciples. Yes, he is like that, Peter, always spirited, always at the front – therefore, the narrator seems to be smiling. But let us not overlook the fact: He also speaks full of respect about Peter. For it is Peter who hauls the heavy net, full of big fish, to shore all by himself. This is the image we get of Peter in the gospels: He is big in failing – denying Jesus when being questioned by the high priests, was the darkest hour of his life – but he is also big in action, the church is greatly indebted to his strength.

In the Gospel of John, the exact number of fish is given: 153. A mysterious number, for which the Church Father Hieronymus has given a decisive explanation. I saw his grave site in Bethlehem in February last year; he was the leader of a cloister there. Hieronymus conducted his studies at the original sites of

the New Testament, and he was in total command of the antique languages Greek and Hebrew. He pointed out that in the old world 153 types of fish had been known. That, therefore, in the number of 153 all types of fish of the entire world had been included.

This catch of fish is also an image of the mission call. The disciples are to be “Fishers of men“. And as with the 153 fish all types of fish of the entire world are mentioned, so the Good News is meant for all peoples of the world, therefore, shall all be gathered in God’s kingdom.

An image of plenty is also the meal of bread and fish, to which Jesus invites at the shore. It seems like a Communion, which we are invited to today, only here there is no wine. Most of all, it reminds us of the feeding of the 5000. As the people listened to the sermon of Jesus at the Sea of Genesaret, evening came, the disciples were worried from where they should get some food for the great crowd, and as Jesus then took the two fish and five loaves of bread of a small boy, thanked God and gave them to the people, and all – more than 5000 people, were fed.

Another image of plenty, and that for people who were in urgent need of it. Flatbread and smoked fish – that was everyday fare of the poor people, who could hardly afford meat.

This is the promise which is connected to the work of Jesus: A life of plenty for the entire world. For us Christians this is hope and mission. Hope against various failures and resignation which may depress us. Mission against inertness and indifference, which always represent temptation.

The night is over - Jesus is standing at the shore of our life, at the shore of death, at the shore of the world. This brief scene with seven disciples at the end of the Gospel of John carries great hope and means a great mission for us as a church.

Amen.