

With Restless Disciples

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[0:00] We'll read from the Gospel of John, chapter 21, verses 1 to 14. And this is the reading of God's Word. After this, Jesus revealed Himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and He revealed Himself in this way.

Simon Peter, Thomas called the twin, Nathaniel of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, I am going fishing. They said to Him, We will go with you. They went out and they got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just as the day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore, yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to them, Children, do you have any fish? They answered Him, No. He said to them, Cast the net on 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 of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, It is the Lord.

[1:06] And when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and he threw himself into the sea. And the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

And when they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. And Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.

So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. Now none of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so would the fish.

And this was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples, after he was raised from the dead. This is God's holy word. Let us pray. Lord, we ask now that you would open our hearts to hear what you have to teach us, to show us how you want to change us today, from your word.

[2:17] And we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. This summer we're looking at some encounters with Jesus throughout the Gospels. There are forty-six people that Jesus encounters individually in the Gospels.

And then if you add the corporate, the group encounters, it's a lot more than that. All types of people, all different backgrounds, all with different aches and pains and issues going on in life. And so one of the things you can do when you read encounters with Jesus across the Gospels is look for yourself across these encounters.

This text, John 21, is an encounter with a group of disciples, particularly Peter. And this text has been read in lots and lots of different ways.

And the way I want to come at it today is really through that lens of the encounter with these disciples. And I want to suggest, I want us to see in this third post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples that Jesus is encountering people, apostles here, who are restless and running away and hiding and fruitless, really, in the ministry that they've been called to.

And that is the reason that Jesus comes to them and comes to encounter them. They had little impact. They had not done great things for God yet.

[3:39] And so Jesus comes to them in that context. Now, lots of people in this room today are believers, Christians. You follow Jesus. You're a

disciple. And you, like me, struggle with the fact that you're intellectually committed.

Credo, I believe, and I know what I believe, that Jesus Christ died and he rose again on the third day and that happened. The facts are there. But you find it really difficult to get the intellectual assent to those truths down into your heart and your hands where you're actually living out the Christian life thoroughly.

And so if you're a Christian today and you've ever said, in your heart, maybe to somebody else, I have a really, really difficult time getting Sundays to matter for Mondays and bringing the whole of what the gospel means and all of its resources down into my normal everyday life.

And I can say today, can you say with me today, I have the existential anxiety, the ache, that I know that there are aspects of me where I am not who I am in Christ and the way I live.

That I've not yet put on all that the gospel calls me to do. And live for him thoroughly in every single way. And that's exactly what's going on here. One way to express this is through David Downing's works.

[4:58] David Downing is an author who's written a number of books about C.S. Lewis. And he wrote a really good book called *The Reluctant Convert*, *The Most Reluctant Convert*. And it's about C.S. Lewis' conversion.

And he records some of the letters of Lewis. And we found a letter from C.S. Lewis to his friend Arthur Greaves. Lewis was 17 years old when he wrote this.

And he says, I believe, Arthur, I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them. And from a philosophical perspective, Christianity is not even the best one.

So he was 17. And then at 32, he writes back to his friend Arthur Greaves. And this is what he says. Christianity is God expressing himself through what we call real things, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

So from 17 to 32, he had been converted. He had come to faith. And one of his other, a young man that knew him at the time that's written a couple books about him as well, and David Downing records this interaction, Walter Hooper, said that as he watched Lewis over the years, very famous quote, in time, he said, he was the most thoroughly converted man I ever knew.

[6:11] Now, God does all the converting. But what did Hooper mean by that? What he meant by that was, over the years, he saw how much the gospel got into the bones of Lewis. And how much it expressed in every area of his life.

And if you come today, and you think, you know, boy, God is out of sight, out of mind for me most days. And I've got a lot of prayerlessness in my calendar. And I really struggle with addiction to an idol that I've not been able to get away from and kill.

John 21 is for you. Let me show you two things. Just two. Number one, the restless and running disciples that we are. And secondly, the revealer who comes for them.

So first, the restless and running disciples that we are, that we can be, that the apostles were. All right, to understand this passage, there's lots of different readings of it, but I think you've really, really got to pay attention to the context and the details that John gives here.

This is the third post-resurrection appearance. We're told that twice in the passage. And in verse one, it says that Jesus revealed himself to them. In John's gospel, the word, the concept reveal, means far more than just show up.

[7:26] John's words are so important. He's very careful. And reveal means an unveiling, a pulling back the curtain, a showing his glory. You saw at the end of the passage when they're sitting with Jesus to have breakfast on the beach, they say, it says, they dared not ask if it was him.

What does that mean when you're standing right next to him? When you're sitting right next to him, you dare not ask? They knew there was something different about him after the resurrection. And here, you have this unveiling of his glory.

Now, how did he do it? That's verse one. Who did he do it to? Verse two. And we're told here about seven disciples that he revealed himself to. And it could be, Peter's mentioned, Nathaniel, John the beloved, and others.

It could be because John is so typically using words and historical facts as symbols. It could be that because there's seven listed, he's talking about all of the twelve.

We don't know. It could be seven. It could be twelve. But here, there's this group of disciples and we're told that they're fishing. Verse three, they're fishing. Peter said, I'm going to go fishing. [8:29] Do you want to go with me? And they went with him. And so, they are 95 miles away from Jerusalem and they're in Galilee and they've gone fishing. And it says here that it was nighttime, very important.

It was dark. They had caught absolutely nothing all night. And John is trying to get you to see throughout his whole gospel that when he uses a word like darkness, night, empty, nothing, that he's conveying not just a historical fact, and it is.

But also something going on about the spiritual condition of the people that he's speaking about. So you can remember someone like Nicodemus. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. It was dark. He was spiritually empty. And he came to ask, what can I do to be saved? In the same way, John is trying to get us to see through the little details that the darkness, the empty nets, the fact that they're not catching any fish is a revelation of what's going on in their souls.

It's a spiritual life issue as well. And the empty nets refer to empty hearts that there's something wrong here. They're not who they're supposed to be in this passage.

[9:35] You can even see this in verse 4 when it says that Jesus shows up on the beach and when the breaking of the day came, when the sun came out, everything changed. Right?

And so John's signaling that this historical detail, this fact, when the morning came, boy, the spiritual realities came too. Everything changed. And you see how much John's using his language to point us to something deeper, spiritually significant throughout the text.

Now, what does that all mean? What's the takeaway here? When you see those facts in the light of chapter 20, in chapter 20, the first two resurrection appearances, in the first appearance, Jesus shows up raised from the dead.

He's in a room with these same disciples. And in chapter 20, verse 22, he says to them, I'm now going to breathe on you. And I'm going to give you the Holy Spirit.

And you're going to go into all the world and where you forgive sins, sins will be forgiven. He gives them apostolic authority saying, as you announce the gospel, sins will be forgiven.

[10:37] Now, when that happens in chapter 20 and you turn to chapter 21, where do you expect to find these apostles? When Jesus has just said, I'm breathing upon you, the Holy Spirit's coming upon you, go into the world and announce the gospel, forgive sins, you expect to find them in the towns and the communities and the cities doing the work of ministry, being fishers of men, announcing the gospel, going to all the world.

And instead, you flip the page, chapter 21, and it says, they went to their hometown and they're fishing. And one more thing to really put this in context.

You've got to know that this is a parallel moment to Luke chapter 5. And in Luke chapter 5, we have the initial calling of Peter and these very disciples. Some of them, at least.

And how was Peter first called? He was fishing. Jesus got into a boat with him. He was casting his net. No fish were being caught.

And Jesus said, but cast your net on the other side in deeper waters. And they did it. And as soon as the net came in full, they bowed before him. And Jesus turned and says, now I will make you fishers of men.

[11:52] What's going on here? You see, this is a parallel moment after the resurrection. And what has happened? This is not just them waiting. They're actually here, I think, sitting on their hands.

They've been given this post-resurrection commission, go into the world. You've got the Holy Spirit. You've got the authority of the gospel. And they went home and they started fishing. They're going in reverse.

They're going back to Luke 5 all over again here. And that's why in verses 4 and 5, when Jesus asked the question, he asked them the question, friends, children, do you have any fish?

What is that question? It's more than just the historical fact. There's something spiritual. There's a heart issue going on in that question. Friends, do you have any fish? And what is he asking? He's saying, are you catching people?

Have you gone out and made, and gone to the towns, the cities, and the communities and brought people into the kingdom? Like I just commissioned you. It's the issue of Luke 5. I will make you fishers of men.

[12:52] And here they are, they're fishing for fish, not for people. They're sitting on their hands. They're not doing great things for the Lord. They're not who God has called them to be yet in ministry at this moment.

And these are the apostles. Thomas, in the previous chapter, he was not there for the first appearance and so he doubts.

And he says, you know, if I can't see Jesus' hands and his feet and his scars, I can't believe. He doubted like a scientist. He said, I need empirical verification. Chapter 21, the third appearance is a different kind of doubt.

It's existential doubt. It's the doubt that we all struggle with as Christians where we say, I'm just not really sure that I totally believe that if I go out and fish for people, serve the Lord in every way he's called us to as Christians, as the church, that there's going to be any transformative power.

In other words, they're in a place where the Holy Spirit is a theological concept but not a belief in a living, personal, transformative. And the power of God with us in the city that God has sent us to.

[14:02] And they've got weak faith. And it's a type of doubt that resides in weak faith. It creates an existential ache that says, I know that I'm a Christian.

I know that I'm called to be transformed in every way throughout my life. And I also know that I am not who God's called me to be. And I can't figure out yet all the ways that that needs to change. And there's this ache deep down in the heart as a disciple where you know that there's a gap there between those two realities. And this is exactly what the apostles were walking through here. We learn here that you can be a Christian and a rebel to God's will. You can be a Christian and you can be a runaway.

You can be a Christian and not walking in the ministry that God has called you to in your normal day-to-day life. And what this passage tells us is that you can do that surrounded by your busyness and normalcy.

[15:04] What did they do? They just went fishing. That was their job. That was their day job. And fishing is not bad. I went fishing last week. I took the kids fishing in Mississippi last week. Fishing is a good thing. It's not about fishing.

It's about wherever God has called you to your day job being thoroughly converted, as it was said of Lewis. Or asking the question, what is God calling me to do with my faith at work?

What is God calling me to do with my faith as I raise up children? What is God calling me to do with my faith as I get to know my neighbors in the place that God has put me? In other words, using the resources of the gospel to ask, what is God calling me to in every area of life?

And so, before I move on to the second last point, look, Peter exemplifies this reality here. You could think of him as a runaway prophet here, a runaway disciple.

In verse 6, Jesus unveils himself. How? He says, cast your net on the other side, and they haul in 153 fish, and then John says, it's the Lord.

[16:10] Remember Luke 5? This is the Lord. And Peter dives into the water. Now, remember that John wants you to really notice the details, and here's a detail that's very strange.

Before Peter jumps in the water, we're told that he put on his outer garments. Now, I don't know how it is when you go swimming, but when I get ready to go swimming, I don't put more clothes on. We don't, you know, we, he, it says even more, the details. The Greek text here says he was naked. Now, it's been translated in a way that suggests probably he was wearing an undergarment that was typical underneath the main cloak, but the Greek uses the word naked.

And you see, I think what's going on here is that this runaway disciple who had denied Jesus three times and who had gone back to his day job after he had been commissioned to go into all the world, to the city, and tell people about the gospel, he's naked.

He's ashamed. And he feels that guilt and he knows that he wants to run to God. He wants to run to his Lord and yet at the same time he knows, if I'm going to go to the Lord, I've got to be clothed.

[17:23] I've got to be covered. And so he covers himself to dive into the water, to appear before the Lord. There's another way that clothing is used throughout the Bible that's really significant, that I think matters here.

And it's also that anytime, when you come to experience the grace of Christ, Old Testament and new, you're clothed, you're robed in righteousness.

And a second act of clothing often happens in the Old Testament. What is it? It's that when a priest is ordained or a person is commissioned, they receive investiture.

What is that? That's this type of clothing in the Old Testament that says you're commissioned, you're sent. Both things I think are going on here. He's covering his shame. He's knowing he needs a robe of righteousness.

And at the same time, he's being recommissioned by Jesus. He's about to have breakfast on the beach and be told, this is who you are. Remember, I'm sending you to feed the sheep. Both things are happening.

[18:22] What is this? Some commentators, and I think they're right, have pointed out that when you look at the details of this scene, especially verse 7, what is it? How does John put it?

Peter hurled himself into the sea. He threw himself into the sea. Where do we see that language in other parts of the Bible? It reminds us of language very similar to the book of Jonah.

When Jonah was in a boat, there's a fish in the water, and he knew that he was naked and ashamed and running from the Lord. He was a Christian. He was a Christian in the Old Testament sense, a disciple, a follower of God, but he was running and he was sitting on his hands, and it says that when he realized, the only way you're going to be saved is if I'm thrown into the sea.

He hurled himself. Peter here looks like Jonah. John is telling us, Christian friends, we are little Jonas. We have been, if you're a Christian today, you've been called, you've been converted, you've been changed, you have the power of the gospel in your life.

You have all the treasures in Christ that you need, and yet we know the ache of struggling to be thoroughly living out the gospel in that way, of knowing what it means to come from Sunday to Monday, and feeling the existential pain of not knowing how to grow and how to change and how to be fishers of people in our day-to-day lives and thinking, you might look up today and think, you know, I don't know that I've ever shared the gospel with anybody, and I've been a Christian for many, many years, and God has called me to be a fisher of people, and that's the ache that Peter's feeling.

[20:00] John 21, it's about all of us. What does Jesus, the revealer, do about it? Secondly, finally, let me give you a few things.

You might come today and say, I'm a Christian, and I have not lived for God. I'm a Christian, and I have not done great things for the Lord. What does the revealer have to say about it?

Let me give you a few. And we'll close. First, the first thing Jesus does is he reveals himself. He reveals himself to runaways. Jesus comes here, and in verse five, he calls them children.

They're in the midst of sitting on their hands, and he says, my children, my family. If you look back at years of sitting on your hands and buried treasure and buried talents, and you say today, again, I'm not who I should be in Christ.

When Jesus shows up on the beach here and says, children, what he is saying to you today, to Peter, to all of us today, is your, your weak discipleship will not keep you out of the kingdom of God.

[21:18] your little faith, your weak faith, your lack of growth is not going to rip you out of God's hand. Jesus, the revealer, comes and encounters you and pursues you and says to you once again, children, your lack of discipleship is not going to pull you away from the Lord.

He's saying here, I'm going to keep you, and I've purchased you, and I've bought you with a price. In verse, sorry, back to Luke chapter 5 when he calls them to be fishers of people, they had this huge catch, and there's this immediate conversation between Peter and Jesus.

Now, in this passage in John 21, I would love to know, maybe you would love to know, what happened in the conversation between Peter and Jesus when Peter dove in the water and made it to the beach before everybody else.

We don't know what happened. We're not told. The reason we're not told is because the boat was 100 yards, 100 meters from the land, and John was in the boat, and John is writing this gospel, and so John didn't hear the conversation between Peter and Jesus.

Maybe it was 10 minutes, 15 minutes for them to get the fish in, get back to the land, but there is a conversation that takes place between Peter and Jesus on the shore that we never know about.

[22:43] I wonder what was said if you go back to Luke chapter 5 when they hauled the fish in, Peter, you know, if Jesus tells you, you haven't been catching fish all day, Jesus says, cast your net on the other side and you bring all these fish in, you might say, wow, you're amazing.

How did you know there were so many fish on that side of the boat? You have real power. That's not what happens. Instead, in Luke 5, it says that Peter bowed his knee before the Lord and said, I am a sinner, depart from me.

Now listen, friends, you know that you've had a real encounter with God, not when you say, whoa, you're amazing, but when you say, I'm a sinner, depart from me.

I need to get away from you. And I would imagine that in John 21, though, I don't know what was said, of course, this is imaginative, I don't know what was said, but I would think in John 21 that when Peter got to the beach, he probably got down on his knees and said, Lord, I abandoned you three times and I'm sitting on my hands, I am a sinner, I don't deserve that you would come and look for me.

I don't deserve, I don't deserve this. And this passage is giving something so simple but so profound, so important to all of us today and that's this. Jesus says, maybe Jesus said it like this, you know, you're a little Jonah, you're a runaway and you've been running and running and running and running but Peter, you remember what I told you?

[24:19] Look for the sign of Jonah. Three days I'll descend down into the belly of death but on the third day look, look for the sign of Jonah. You know, what he may have said, he may have said, you're a little Jonah, you're a runaway, you've not done great things for the Lord, you've got weak faith but I'm the true and better Jonah and I went down into the water so that you might rise up and he's telling you here today to restless and maybe fruitless and maybe folks in the room that have had little impact on their community and on the person that you've been walking with for so many years but never shared the gospel with, he's telling you today your lack of discipleship will not keep you away from Jesus.

He comes for you. His grace will not let you go. Then he tells them, he tells them, let's respond to that. He tells them, now go and cast your net on the other side.

Look at those empty nets for just a second. What is the empty net they're saying to us as disciples? It's telling us something so simple that when you're not looking at Jesus in your daily life and you're not listening to Jesus in your daily life and Jesus is not the active practical center of your entire life then there's going to be fruitlessness.

So fruitfulness in ministry depends upon dependence and all this text is really saying is disciple of Jesus, follower of Jesus, listen to Jesus, look to Jesus.

There's an opportunity in God's providence. He's gathered us all here today and in God's providence today, this morning is the morning where he's coming and asking you to ask yourself, in what ways am I not following Christ in my day-to-day life and to come and say, hey, it's time to cast your net on the other side, to seek change, repentance, to dive into the water and go down so that you can come up again.

[26:13] The third thing that he tells them here of four, and this is the more specific point and I think the main point, he says, you are called, the main calling of the church of followers of Jesus is to be fishers of people.

And so in this scene, he's asking all of us to look and renew our calling to be fishers of human beings, to go out into the world and share the message of the gospel with people in our lives. What does it mean to be a fisher of people? Not obvious language to us in the 21st century. Most of us don't fish very often. Why did Jesus take this idea of fishing to talk about the sharing of the gospel?

And the reason for it is that in the Greco-Roman world and the ancient Near East, the sea is a place in most people's minds of chaos and darkness and death.

And I don't know if you've ever been out, if you've ever been out to the very tip top of Scotland or the tip top of the Isle of Lewis or Shetland. If you have, you've seen the North Sea and if, on the east side, and if you've seen the North Sea, you know that on a stormy day, you look out and say, I have no idea how pre-modern people ever navigated these waters.

[27:28] That's the image of the seas to people in the pre-modern world. What is Jesus saying when he says, go and be a fisher of people? He's saying that you're called to bring people out of the place of darkness, the domain of the seas, the place of chaos, into the light of the land, into the sunshine.

And so this is, this is a simple recommissioning to every disciple in this room that the calling is to go out into the world and help human beings that God has put in your life by works of mercy and ultimately the words of the gospel to help them move from a place of darkness to light, from a lack of hope to hope.

And Jesus is calling us to renew our sense of that. I heard this week a celebrity that has come to faith in Christ from a really, really hard life, and they're a very well-known person, and I was listening to a podcast with them this week, and one of the things they said, they were asked about how they were going to use their celebrity as a Christian in the coming years, and this person said, well, my mission now is to preach the gospel, to love people, and to be forgotten.

So I'm trying as best as I can to be forgotten. And Jesus is saying here that to God's glory, every single Christian's mission is to love God, love people, love the church, and love the people God's put in your life and then preach the gospel in order to be forgotten, in order to not be that important, in order to give God all the glory, and that's the renewal of discipleship and commitment we're being asked to.

And then lastly, the last thing Jesus invites you today to renew discipleship is to come, he says at the end, come and have breakfast with me. He calls them children, he calls them family, even though they're runaways, but the climax is in verse 9, when they get to the beach, Jesus had prepared a breakfast for them, he had set the fire, and it says that he took bread and he gave it to them.

[29:28] Now what does that sound like to you? And we're about to celebrate the Lord's Supper, and you see, Jesus Christ was saying, because I rose, because of John chapter 20, today I can come and say to you, you are my family, even in the midst of your weak faith.

I will not let you go. And the Lord's Supper says to us today exactly that. Now I want to finish with this. The details in the Gospel of John, so important.

There are only two places in the Gospel of John where a charcoal fire is mentioned. So sometimes John says something and then he adds an adjective or a little detail that you think, this is extraneous, if the editors were on top of this, they would say, you don't need this to progress the story, but he puts it in anyway.

And there are two places in the Gospel of John where he adds a detail, a charcoal fire. One is right here, John 21. The first is in John 18. And in John 18, Jesus had been arrested and he was at the high priest courtroom, the courtyard of the high priest.

Peter was with him, but Peter was not allowed to go inside. And so Peter was outside the courtroom and he was standing at the door and it says there was a slave girl at the door and she said to Peter, are you not one of his disciples?

[30:52] And he said, I am not. And then John writes, and there was a charcoal fire sitting next to them because it was cold. And you say, John, you didn't need that clause.

And then you come to John chapter 21 and the only other place in the New Testament charcoal fire is mentioned. And here it is. And when they got back to the beach, it said Jesus had already prepared the charcoal fire.

And you know what I think is going on there? I think John's trying to bring a connection to us and I think what he's saying to us is Jesus was using the charcoal fire to say to Peter, do you remember? Do you remember the first time you were asked, are you my disciple?

And you said, I am not. And he's saying, Peter, we're back here again. And are you my disciple? And this time, it is not Peter's job to answer.

You see, the fact of the fire, the fact that Jesus is sitting there, he's prepared breakfast, he's become the host of the covenant meal. And he's saying, you said no, but I say yes. You said no to me, but I overcame your no with my yes.

[32:01] And you are my disciple. And by the power of the cross and resurrection, I have claimed you. Your family, you're loved by God. Your weak faith will not get you out of my hands.

You were ashamed of me. That's not enough to take the gospel away from you. That's not enough to take the power of the cross away. The first fire announced Peter's betrayal.

The second fire announced his belonging. The same hearth that witnessed Peter's rebellion is the very hearth by which he was restored.

That's what John's showing us here. The cross of Christ turns restless rebels! into family! And then it keeps us there. And if you come today saying, I have not done great things for God!

And I am not the Christian in terms of my life that God has called me to be! Jesus Christ wants you to know as you come and you take and eat that His grace is sufficient and it will never let you get out of the hand of God.

[33:02] He loves you to the uttermost. And that the true and better Jonah, He went down into the depths so you could rise up. And as long as you're in Him and you are, you will be family.

He will never let you go. Weak faith people, come and eat with Him today. Let us pray. Father, we ask now that you meet with us in just a moment as we come to dine at your table.

You are the host. Thank you for wanting to have breakfast with us. And so we see that in this passage, Lord, come and eat with us. We ask now, Lord, that you would come and speak especially to those in this room who think, I have years and years and years of nominal faith.

I've not lived for the Lord. I've not shared my faith. I've not changed. Lord, come to them and speak your love to them and then send us out into our city to be fishers of people.

And so that's our prayer today. We ask for that in Jesus' name. Amen.