Commonplace Miracles

A meditation on John 21: 1 – 19

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church May 5, 2019

Listen again to the last two verses of John, chapter 20, which we read last Sunday:

*Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples’ presence, signs that aren’t recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.*

None of the Gospel writers have much to say about Jesus’ movements during those mysterious forty days between his resurrection and his returning to God. It is in Luke’s second volume, *the Acts of the Apostles*, that we even learn about those apparently indescribable 40 days. Mark says nothing, his Gospel ending in stunned silence and an acknowledgement of the disciples’ fear. There is a “P.S.” tacked on to save the church any embarrassment or shame over the human emotions of fear and doubt.

Matthew tells us that Jesus gathers his disciples in Galilee, reminds them to be teachers and to be baptizers; and most importantly, promises to never leave them. Of course he does leave them, immediately after saying those words, so they have to learn the truth with which we live: that God is ever present even though we cannot reach out and touch God. Luke gives us the image of a patient teacher. On Easter afternoon, Luke tells us, Jesus walks alongside two frightened disciples, helping them understand all that has happened. He walks, he teaches, he shares a meal. Then He returns to visit with Thomas, who has been longing to see Him.

Each writer offers us a different perspective on the resurrected Jesus, and these stories are surprising in their simplicity. We have become so accustomed to hearing them that we don’t stop to think about what is missing from them. No parables, no sermons, no healings, no miracles (Except for the easy way Jesus seems to move about the world – distances and locked doors do not even exist for him.) No crowds of people. Simple encounters with two disciples on the way to Emmaus, or ten disciples tucked in behind a locked door.

And then there’s John’s version, which has two endings. There is the ending we just read, which references unrecorded miraculous signs, and then there is the epilogue: Peter’s redemption. Jesus meets seven of the disciples at the Sea of Galilee, and what does he do? Nothing extraordinary; He cooks breakfast!

Some Bible scholars believe this chapter was added for the sake of the church, much like the epilogue tacked on to Mark’s Gospel. Peter is supposed to be the rock upon which the church is built. Jesus said so! To leave him shamed in the Gospel narrative, the last story of his life a denial of relationship with Jesus? That doesn’t feel like a very firm foundation for the church.

If the story we read today was tacked on to redeem Peter, then let’s say, “Amen.” Judas’ story is heartbreak enough. Peter’s painful threefold denial of knowing Jesus, is recorded in all four gospels. There aren’t many stories that are found in all four versions of Jesus’ life and ministry. His own birth is only recorded in two of them! There are seven-ish common stories (with lots of room for debate) and they include his baptism, the feeding of the five thousand, the one angry scene of Jesus flipping out on the money changers and his arrest/crucifixion/burial. Resurrection isn’t really named in Mark; an empty tomb and a proclamation of resurrection being two different things. But Peter’s betrayal is so striking, so shocking, so human, that all four writers tell us this story.

All four tell us of his failings, only one writer offers us his redemption. That’s okay. It’s actually quite Biblical. Uncertainty is part of the life of faith. All these unresolved plot lines in the Bible are opportunities for imagining how God’s mercy unfolds. But clearly, someone either felt compassion or fear with regard to Peter. Someone felt the need to complete his story. Was the church ready to build itself on the back of someone who loved Jesus, who was passionate to an extreme, but who was also volatile and as we might say today, “a hot mess?” Um…no. So someone captures the story of Jesus, rising before dawn to cook breakfast for Peter.

Theologian Scott Hoezee writes (Center for Excellence in Preaching):

*What is Jesus doing here? Why isn’t he in Rome lecturing the Caesar? Why isn’t he in Jerusalem telling old Herod and Pilate the truth of what had happened to him as a result of their execution orders? Why wasn’t Jesus anywhere else but that beach, maybe curing cancer, healing the blind, releasing some prisoners, making some crooked ways straight?*

It’s hard to fathom that none of that was as important as cooking breakfast for Peter…until we realize that Jesus was cooking breakfast for every single one of us. We may be a little late showing up, but when it comes to Jesus, there will always be enough leftover. Always.

Look at this beautiful scene, and how Jesus invites Peter to reimagine his call to ministry.

In Luke, Peter’s first experience of Jesus is under the exact same circumstances as the ones we just read. Peter has been fishing all night and has caught nothing. Jesus tells Peter to throw his nets out on the opposite of the boat, which makes no sense. Let’s be real. It’s a small boat. If there are fish near the boat, you would probably be able to find them. But Peter does what Jesus says – probably to prove him wrong. When the nets begin to rip because they are so full of fish, Peter realizes that Jesus is no ordinary rabbi.

Peter prostrates himself in the bottom of the boat, and says, “Jesus, “Leave me. I am a sinner.” Jesus doesn’t say, “Well, I already knew that” or “I have the power to forgive your sins.” Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid.”

When seeing Jesus walking on water, Peter attempted – unsuccessfully - to do the same. Don’t be afraid of the water, Peter! This is the same disciple who didn’t want Jesus to wash his feet – not something God’s son should be doing. Don’t be afraid to love like this, Peter!

Don’t be afraid. It’s what angel messengers say to newly pregnant parents, to shepherds in their fields and to women at an empty tomb. Don’t be afraid of an infant. Don’t be afraid of things you cannot reason out. Don’t be afraid of miracles. It’s what Jesus says when he comes back from the grave. “Don’t be afraid.”

But fear is a powerful force. In the face of the threat of persecution, Peter panicked.

Despite Jesus’ faith in Peter, when the world rose up against Jesus, Peter crumbled. He failed: denying knowing Jesus, denying being his disciple, refuting his truth at the very same time that Jesus was on trial, confessing his truth.

With all this history between them, Jesus meets Peter, perhaps on the very same stretch of beach where he met him the first time. Jesus meets Peter while he is fishing. Catching nothing. Jesus again tells him to throw his nets on the other side. Again the nets are filled, although this time they don’t rip…

Having learned his limitations, Peter doesn’t ask permission to walk on the water, but he does immerse himself, swimming to shore. Washed and renewed in baptismal waters, Peter walks out onto the shore, where a fire is waiting to warm him.

Peter is drawn to the warm fire, just as he was on the night of Jesus’ trial. Around that fire, he denied Jesus. Around this fire he will be redeemed.

Jesus has cooked breakfast. (Who knew Jesus could cook??) He hasn’t multiplied bread and fish. Just cooked breakfast over a campfire. Such an everyday ordinary thing to do. How many times had Peter shared a meal with Jesus? A meal exactly like this one. In this familiar setting, a fisherman and a rabbi meet again. Peter is not the same man he was three years ago. His heart has been broken open to the love of God, but his heart has also been broken by the depths to which he believes he has disappointed God. Peter needs an everyday miracle, and he is about to receive one.

After the meal:

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks Peter. (Love, as in “agape,” often used in reference to the unconditional love between God and humans.)

“I love you, Jesus,” Peter says. (Love, as in “phile,” most often used in reference to the love of family and friends.)

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks. Do you love me with an “agape” love?

“I love you, Jesus.” “Phile.”

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks. And this time Jesus says, “do you love me with a “phile” love?”

“I love you, Jesus. I love you with a “phile” love.

Jesus meets Peter *right where he is*, with his shame and his sadness. He both accepts the love that Peter can offer, meeting him there in his “phile” love, and makes it clear that Peter has the capacity to love even more deeply, to love with an “agape” love. Peter will live into this promise, but until then, there is no shaming.

What is true for Peter, is true for you and I.

God says to us –

Don’t be afraid that your mistakes will define you.

Don’t be afraid that God sees you.

Don’t be afraid that God comes to meet you.

Don’t be afraid to follow God.

And know that God believes you are capable of loving with an agape love, a love that doesn’t let us go back to the safety of what we know, but sends us out to take the risk of loving the whole world. It’s not about feeding multitudes or about restoring someone’s sight – although it might be. It’s probably more like this:

* Meet people where they are. It’s harder than it sounds.
* Make breakfast for someone who needs to hear about God’s love. Or dinner, if you are not a morning person.
* Offer forgiveness to someone who has hurt you. The companion piece is asking for someone’s forgiveness!
* Invite someone to participate in ministry with you. It’s easier together and there are lots of sheep to feed.

And when we do these things, we will come to understand what God has always believed - we are capable of performing miracles. Every single day.

Thanks be to God, the God of Easter miracles. Amen.