

“What Happens Next?”
John 21:1-19
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In his book *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* (p. 145) Robert Fulghum says that, whenever he told a story to his children when they were small and added the customary fairy tale ending, “And they lived happily ever after,” one would always ask, “And THEN what happened?” How could he tell them that Cinderella discovered she was married to a guy with a foot fetish and that glass slippers hurt like...? How could he tell them that the frog who was kissed by the princess might have turned into a prince, but still had the personality of a frog and ate flies for breakfast? In short, how could he tell them the truth about what happens next after the fairy tale ends and real life begins?

The first disciples are dealing with a similar challenge in today’s reading from John. They have endured Jesus’ suffering on a cross. They have found the tomb to be empty and then interacted multiple times with the Risen Christ. It has been an unexpected and indescribable joy, more wonderful than the most outlandish fairy tale! But what happens next? What are they supposed to do know? And how might the answers to these questions inform life for us after the joy of Easter?

For even if we embrace the Good News of resurrection, what happens next? Life seems to go on much as it did before. The same problems exist in the world around us. Has anything changed? Is there anything different? And what exactly are we supposed to be doing?

One thing we see in the reading from John is that the first disciples go back to many of their routines. They haven’t fully processed what it means that Jesus is alive, what he has called them to do, but they have to make a living, they have to eat. They get no family leave time. So, they go back to work. They are fishermen. So, they take the boat out and fish all night. They catch nothing, but that’s why they call it fishing, not catching. Even the best have empty nights.

I've had some of those. Years ago, my friend with whom I owned an athletic store and I took a three-day fishing trip to Florida. We got up well before dawn every morning. We were going to catch some big bass on the St. John's River! Well, we caught more fish in two hours that spring in a big creek outside of Louisville, Kentucky where we lived.

Like some of you, I have also eaten some of the fish from Lake Galilee, "St. Peter's Fish" they call them, though they are actually just a variety of tilapia. Our ministers' group got sick after eating some St. Peter's fish. So be careful if you go to Israel.

Anyway, the point is — they go back to work and fishing is what they do, who they are. They need to make a living, but in addition to this ever-present reality, they need something familiar to give them the ballast to stay upright amidst all the changes they are going through — watching Jesus die, seeing him alive again. One event is tragic, the other magnificent, but both are jolting. They need some stability.

We benefit from such stability when we are jolted by traumatic losses or wonderful joys. We benefit from something familiar, something routine. After 9-11, many of us had the responsibility of helping children cope with things they were hearing whether we wanted them to or not. One of the primary recommendations was to give them as much structure as possible, as much normalcy as possible. They would find strength from doing things they were used to doing.

This is the case for children, youth and adults, and it applies to not just difficult experiences but joyful ones as well, like the Good News of resurrection. Like the first disciples, we still need to make a living after we embrace the hope of eternal life, and like them, we need a little ballast in our lives as we sort through the implications of this hope.

Another thing we see in the reading from John is that the first disciples experience ups and downs on their journey, even as they bask in the glow of resurrection. We might think they experience nothing but ups and more ups, especially right after Jesus has been raised. The adrenaline alone should keep them going for months! But they have ups and downs. They have a bad night fishing. It turns into a good morning when a man on the shore tells them to cast their net to the other side of

the boat, the starboard side, and it immediately fills with an enormous number of fish.

So, their work is up and down, but so is their faith because, at first, they don't recognize the man on shore. Maybe, like me, some of them need a little help with their distance vision, but not all of them, and it's not that big of a lake. They don't recognize the Risen Christ even when he is standing right before their very eyes. Whatever else the resurrection accomplishes, it does not immediately give the disciples perfect faith. They still have ups and downs. They only realize it is Jesus when their nets fill with fish.

In like manner, we still have our ups and downs even after we embrace the Good News of Easter. Faith is a journey. We are always taking two steps forward and one step back, sometimes the other way around. We need not get discouraged but ought to anticipate struggle as a part of life, even life lived in the light of resurrection.

In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* Father Zossima puts it this way (p. 58).

Never be frightened at your own faint-heartedness in attaining love. Don't be too frightened overmuch even at your evil actions. I'm sorry I can say nothing more consoling to you, for love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams...active love is labor and fortitude, and for some people too, perhaps, a complete science. But I predict that just when you see with horror that in spite of all your efforts, you are getting further from your goal instead of nearer to it – at that very moment I predict that you will reach it and behold clearly the miraculous power of the Lord who has been all the time loving you and mysteriously guiding you.

Such is the nature of life and love and faith for us all.

So, in this reading from John we see the first disciples returning to many of their routines after Jesus' resurrection, and we see them experiencing ups and downs, but in the end their lives are transformed

even amidst the ordinary details of life. Their net fills with fish, they recognize Jesus, and they not only share a post-resurrection meal with him, they are given a purpose, a calling - to feed his sheep. This call is given explicitly to Peter, but implicitly it applies to all. All are called to express love for Christ by caring for his children in this world.

The message for us is that this is what happens next after the joy of Easter. Not that our net fills with fish; we don't always experience this kind of miracle. But we recognize Jesus in the details of life, not always at first, but eventually. Then, we feast with him at the communion table and other tables too. And ultimately, we are sent forth to care for Jesus' children which means everyone, but especially those who are vulnerable and in great need. The after-Easter experience is not a perpetual party wherein we sit back and enjoy the fat of the land. It's not like the celebration of a hockey team after a victory, though that has been great! It is a calling to faithful service, a calling to follow Jesus, a calling to lay down life for others. That may not sound very exciting, but it is.

So, now that we have celebrated Easter, what happens next is that we visit those who are sick and homebound, we attend funerals and visitations and listen to the pain of others, we show up when it matters. We offer clothing to those who need it, food for children on weekends, hospitality to whoever is in need in our community. We welcome the stranger not just in our land but in our state and city and church. And in our own humble way, whether through words or deeds, we give witness to our experience with the Risen Christ, not in an effort to coerce anyone into sharing our beliefs, but out of a desire to point others in the direction of hope, a hope they will have to embrace for themselves.

At the end of the 1972 film "The Candidate" Robert Redford's character, having won the election, as much to his surprise as anyone else's, says with a mixture of relief and anxiety, "What do we do now?" It is a question many politicians ask, and it is the question we ask on this side of Easter. Fortunately, the narrative of John 21 provides some answers. What do we do now? We return to many ordinary aspects of life, we have ups and downs, and we take care of Jesus' sheep, we love the wounded people of this world every way we can.