

“Worth Driving Home”
John 21
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One of my favorite Broadway musicals is *Les Misérables*. Based on Victor Hugo’s novel, it tells the story of an ex-convict, Jean Valjean, and his struggle for redemption in 19th-century France. Though there are countless scenes that move me, one particular scene came to mind as I read our gospel lesson and prepared for today. It’s the epilogue scene, when Jean Valjean is sitting alone in an empty church with candles lit around him. It’s the same church that he entered years earlier as a criminal and now it’s the place in which he finds himself dying — but dying as one who, through the struggles of his life, now knows what it’s like to love sacrificially. To be forgiven. To be known as the person he now is. And he’s able to claim the freedom and hope that tomorrow brings, as is sung in that grand finale. It’s a powerful way that Victor Hugo underscores the over-arching theme of redemption and drives it home.

The best epilogues have a way of doing that, don’t they? Of giving us one more opportunity to grasp the bigger story being told and drive it home.

And John 21 is no different.

It also is an epilogue to the story that John has told about the life and ministry of Jesus. And he actually wraps it up very succinctly by the end of chapter 20: the tomb has been found empty. The resurrected Jesus has appeared not one but three times — to Mary, to his disciples, to Thomas. And the chapter ends with these words: “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” Sounds like a great way for John to conclude his gospel account, doesn’t it?

But right when we think it's time to turn the page, low and behold, there's more!

Chapter 21, likely penned by a different author, has a little more to say:

While Jesus appears the first three times in Jerusalem, within the first week or so of Jesus' resurrection, our scripture today clues us to the fact that the disciples have since left Jerusalem and returned to Galilee, back to the safety of the countryside and away from those terrible forces that Jesus confronted in Jerusalem that had left the disciples fearing for their lives. They've gone home, returning to something familiar, something trusted — returning to their nets that they had left behind on this very shore just three years earlier when they had first decided to follow Jesus.

Can't you just imagine the confusion they must have been feeling as they continued to process their grief, having seen Jesus die a such a terrible death and then to go to the tomb to discover Jesus was no longer there. And not only that, but they're also processing the inexplicable surprises of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances when they were in Jerusalem.

I think of how hard it is for us when we've lost someone we love and the time it takes to let that reality sink in...

Before my mom died, I spent the last few years going to Laurinburg every Friday to visit and help take care of her. And after she died, Friday would roll around, and I found myself time and again still planning my week as if Friday was a Laurinburg day with mom. It took time for mom's death to sink in. And my loss meant that I had to change my patterns of thinking and doing.

And so it might have been for Jesus' disciples, weeks after that empty tomb. I imagine they too were struggling to change their patters, their routines — having spent the last three years of their lives literally following Jesus.

I imagine they were also trying to make sense of the fact that Jesus died — but was now raised. That Jesus appeared to them in that upper room behind locked doors — that he was visible, but then gone. That he emerged again in Thomas' presence to let him touch the wounds on his hands and side. That he was there, but then gone. Maybe Jesus is helping them become accustomed to living in this world not as if he has died and is no longer around — and also not as if he's risen and going to be always physically present like he used to be.

It seems Jesus is opening space for this new concept of what it means to be present with Jesus now — cultivating an awareness with his disciples — cultivating an awareness with us — that though his presence is different than when he walked on this earth, he is indeed still with us — offering words of peace and encouragement and challenge — even though we don't always recognize his presence among us.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel an ebb and flow to my perception of God's nearness. Sometimes, many times I feel like God is as close as my next breath, that I can sense God's comforting arms around me, ushering me through a difficult season, or celebrating with me when I'm bubbling over with joy and gratitude. But sometimes, when I return from those mountain-top experiences to more mundane days, I don't always recognize God's presence — at least not as readily.

How assuring it is to be reminded through scripture that even when we're disillusioned and struggling to make sense of life, that Jesus is indeed present. That, in fact, he's never left. That at any time, we can sense his presence in a word of peace spoken to us when we're fearful, in a concrete, tactile way when we're perhaps doubtful. In a friendly gesture and word of encouragement when nothing we do seems to be working. In the nourishment of tried-and-true friends gathered for a simple meal.

That message speaks to me when I read this scripture, and it's a truth worth driving home. That God through Christ is still active in this world and is always with us, even when we don't recognize him. Even when we don't feel his presence.

Jesus, indeed, was present for his followers by the Sea of Tiberias that morning. He noticed that the disciples had been fishing all night and had nothing to show for their efforts. So he waved them down and encouraged them to cast their nets on the other side of their boats — and as dawn breaks, they bring in a bountiful, nearly net-breaking catch.

He makes breakfast for them and feeds the same meal he fed the multitudes on a hillside not far away — a generous meal of fish and bread. And the familiarity of this meal and time together sparks the disciples' memories, and they know without even asking that they're in the presence of the risen Lord. Memories have a way of doing that, don't they?

And then, Jesus has some very specific words with Peter.

To give a little context, you'll remember that before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus told Peter that he would deny him, and sadly, his prediction came true. Peter is confronted repeatedly by bystanders in the courtyard while Jesus is being questioned, and each time, Peter — the Rock upon whom the church is to be built — cowards and denies ever knowing Jesus. He is absent at the crucifixion. He is among the disciples who meet behind locked doors out of fear. Even so, Jesus sits before him and speaks to him directly: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Jesus asks him three times, allowing Peter three chances to re-affirm his love for Jesus. He's given the opportunity to face the Risen Lord, let go of his guilt, or shame, or feelings of unworthiness -- and begin again. To me, this offers some of the deepest implications of Resurrection for us: we are known, we are forgiven and we are given the chance to start over. If what we've carried away from the first twenty chapters of John's gospel is the idea that the final thing to remember about Peter is his

unfaithfulness, this epilogue reminds us that far more important than Peter's denials is the grace of Christ. Another truth worth driving home.

In the economy of Jesus' grace, there is no room for guilt or shame. Because there's work to be done! Jesus makes it clear — triply clear, in fact — that to love him is to feed and tend to his flock. (Sounds like Jesus' greatest commandment — to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself, doesn't it?) We are not only called to proclaim God's love and put on the Christian moniker, but we're called to act on it. To put hands and feet and heart into it. To help the sick and clothe the poor and welcome the stranger — because, after all, that IS what it means to follow Jesus. What a bold invitation — to strive to recognize the Risen Christ among us and to have a part in making his presence known and felt — and real — to friend and foe — through the love Christ has demonstrated and bountifully given us to share.

To know what it's like to be loved sacrificially. To be forgiven. To be seen for who we are. To claim through Christ's death and resurrection the freedom and hope that tomorrow brings.

That's an epilogue for the ages.

And it's full of truths worth driving home.