

## “A Fish Breakfast in Tiberias”

John 21:1-14 (NRSV)

Have you ever been to Israel and looked or sailed upon the beautiful, ancient **Sea of Tiberias**? That’s what it was called in Roman days, and there is still a town by that name, nestled beside its western shore, in the beautiful, green, rolling hills of Galilee, just across from the southern edge of the ascent to Golan Heights. It’s really a lake, of course, and has also been known by the name of the **Lake of Gennesaret** or **Kinneret**. Nowadays, it’s mostly called the **Sea of Galilee**.

The Sea of Tiberias is **the largest freshwater lake in Israel**, and it is approximately 53 kilometers (33 miles) in circumference, about 21 km (13 miles) long and 13 km (8 miles) wide. At 209 meters below sea level, it is **the lowest freshwater lake on earth**, situated as it is, deep in the Jordan Great Rift Valley, the valley caused by the separation of the African and Arabian plates, and it is fed partly by underground springs and mostly by the legendary Jordan River which flows through it from north to south, although in many places this river has now dwindled to a muddy, dirty trickle.

It was in the waters of this lake that our Lord’s disciples first cast their fishing nets and caught the small round fish, called Tilapia, later named, appropriately enough, St. Peter’s fish. It was on the northern slopes of this lake’s shores that our Lord preached his Sermon on the Mount. And it was on these waters that they often sailed together and watched the sun go down.

John 21 is essentially **an epilogue** to the fourth Gospel, recording certain occurrences after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The opening event of this chapter, which focuses on **an all-night fishing expedition** by the apostolic band, is **a living parable of how the risen Lord relates to his servants as they toil in this world**. Of course, at the time, the disciples had no idea they were actors in a spiritual drama. But when it was over and as the days passed, giving opportunity for reflection, they understood the connection with this and an earlier event.

When they were first called to be disciples, they’d also been **fishing**, and Jesus had pointed out the symbolism there by saying, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people” (Mk. 1:17). Now after everything that had happened in Jerusalem they’d returned to fishing, the only thing they once knew how to do, and they’d caught nothing.

The **similarity of the two scenes** is obvious. Both times there had been a

frustrating night of fruitless toil. Both times Jesus commanded them to let down the net once more. Each time there was an instant, great success: the nets were full. These parallels must have driven the disciples to reflect in the days that followed Jesus' resurrection on the peculiarities of this last miracle. Again they discovered **the care the risen Christ has for his followers** as they seek to serve him in the world.

John gives us **a delightful picture of the risen Christ** standing on the pebble beach in the increasing light of dawn, interested in, caring about, directing and crowning with his own blessing, the obedient work of his faithful servants as they toil on the "restless seas" of life.

### 1. **The church at work** (John 21:1-3).

The opening words suggest **an idyllic scene**. Jesus shows up on the lakeshore, a familiar place (21:1), a place with all kinds of memories that went back all the way to the time they'd first met.

By this time the dizzying whirl of Passover Week and the numbing, awful horror of the crucifixion had been replaced by **a growing sense of certainty** because of **the empty tomb**. Further, their Friend and Lord, **Jesus Christ had appeared** to a number of the disciples and the women in a number of places, most recently, suddenly appearing to them in the upper room through closed doors. Then even "doubting Thomas" had seen him and cried, "My Lord and my God" (Jn. 20:28). They'd been vindicated; they felt a surge of new hope. Then they travelled the 128 kilometers (80 miles) from Jerusalem **back up to Galilee**, just as Jesus, and the angelic messengers in the tomb, had told them they should do.

It was **old, familiar territory**. It brought back good memories. They needed that warm, sunlit time and place. The conversations must have been lively. Old mysteries were rehashed, and some were cleared up. No doubt, the Scriptures were avidly discussed. There was talk about the future. Most of all, there was talk, incessant talk, about Jesus. When would they see him again? What would he say? The possibilities were delicious. He'd shown up a number of times. But, would this go on and on? Was he still with them? Maybe there were still some nagging doubts. **The stage was set for Jesus Christ to illustrate his earthly ministry to the church.**

As usual, **Peter's inability to sit still** helped to create this next stage. The tangy aroma of the sea and the addictive lapping of the water were too much

for him. Finally, he blurted out to his companions, **“I’m going fishing”** (21:2b). The six other disciples with him immediately said they’d go with him (21:3a). Evening or early morning was the best time – every fisherman knows that – so at dusk, after gathering some gear, the seven of them left shore with an honest joy in the accustomed feel of the oars and the hoisting of the patchwork sail and casting and recasting the net, especially luxuriating in the beauty of the deepening reflection of a million stars over Galilee. It was wonderful – the earth, the sky, the water and the wind, the hearty, masculine camaraderie. There was only one problem. They didn’t catch anything (21:3b). As the night wore on, the casts became fewer and fewer, and the night got cooler and cooler. Conversation dwindled – except for Peter’s continual, harping comments about pollution, over-fishing, the lunar calendar, the inferior net, the landlubbers who fell asleep and that maybe this was all a mistake. Maybe they’d lost their touch; maybe they wouldn’t ever be successful again.

Unknown to the disciples, the seven of them were **a macrocosm of the church toiling in a busy world**. The tiny boat, heaving on what must have seemed to be a large sea, bearing the apostolic band, portrays some abiding realities, realities that are important to our own spiritual health.

First, let us see that **a primary obligation of the church is “fishing for people,”** or evangelizing the world. True, this specific idea might’ve been far from the minds of the disciples as they fished that day, but clearly that’s what John wanted us to see. You only have to remember the first fishing miracle, about three years earlier, when Jesus Christ called to the disciples and invited them to “fish for people.” Evangelism and church development is to have a prominent place in the ministry of the church. It should never be eclipsed by a search for justice and social involvement, important as that is. Today we are facing that danger. Just because it’s hard to do and seems like self-interest, it must not be avoided. **We are to be constantly “fishing for people,”** no matter how tough the task, or dark or cold the night.

Along with the emphasis on evangelism, the picture in John 21 suggests **hard work**. Fishing for fish and fishing for people is exhausting, time-consuming labour. In all of this we are to realize, secondly, that **without Jesus Christ we can do nothing**. The disciples were pros at fishing. They paid careful attention to their equipment and great attention to their strategies for fishing. I’m sure they knew how the fish surfaced, how to dip their oars quietly, and how to cast their net. We, too, know so many things about ministry, but the Lord says to us, as he said to the disciples, in the

upper room, “**Apart from me you can do nothing**” (Jn. 15:5). It’s so easy to think we can do spiritual work on our own. We think we can donate hundreds of hours and dollars to the church and see nothing come of it. But as we depend upon Jesus Christ we will eventually have fruit for our labour.

## 2. **The church’s lesson** (John 21:4-6).

This was **the lesson Jesus had to teach his disciples one more time.**

The night was far spent, the blush of dawn was breaking and warming the eastern sky, and the disciples were tired and heading for home. They were probably not thinking of the Lord, but unknown to them, Jesus was watching them. In fact he had seen everything. He asked them if they had caught any fish. Exhausted, they simply said, “No” (21:5). Maybe they didn’t recognize his voice. Maybe the thick mists of the dawn and the heaviness of the disciples’ weary eyelids prevented them from recognizing who it was on the shore. Whatever the case, it is to the disciples’ abiding credit that they didn’t hide the reality of their failure and disappointment. I’m told a fisherman will not want to tell you if he is doing well, because he’s afraid you may horn in on his choice spot, and if he’s doing poorly, he doesn’t want to admit it. Can you blame him?

But **the disciples acknowledged their disappointment and failure.** I’d like to imagine that if they’d lied, Jesus would have disappeared or walked over to them on the water to check on the supposed catch! But, the good news is that they told the truth. A famous British journalist of a few years ago, **Malcolm Muggeridge**, thought failure is the most creative phenomenon of life, and much as I dislike it, I think he’s right. If we didn’t come up short and sometimes fail – and admit it – and go looking for alternative solutions, we wouldn’t make any progress in life. Failure demands we assess our past methods to see what we’ve done right or wrong. Failure helps us discard the moribund and obsolete and can open us up to new ideas and new ways of doing things. Setbacks and failures are opportunities for reassessment and reengagement. I sometimes think the long years of working towards completing our building project have been a bit like that.

Many years ago **a young, backwoods man** ran for the legislature in one of the large mid-western states of the USA and was badly defeated. He next entered business, failed and spent 17 years of his life paying the debts of a worthless partner. He was in love with a beautiful woman to whom he

became engaged, but she died. Re-entering politics, he ran for Congress but again he was badly defeated. He then tried to get an appointment to the United States Land Office but failed. He became a candidate for the US Senate was badly defeated. Two years later he was again defeated. It was one failure after another. But he refused to give up and eventually became President of the United States, perhaps the greatest. His name was **Abraham Lincoln**. In spite of the setbacks in his life, many books have now been written about how he became the conscience of the nation, and one of humanity's greatest souls, as well as one of the most deeply admired political and spiritual leaders anywhere on earth.

**Muggeridge** says, beautifully, "Christianity, from Golgotha onwards, has been the sanctification of failure" (Ian Hunter, *A Life*, 1984, p. 224). Peter the great "rock" of the church, rose from the heap of failure. The apostle Paul asserted that his setbacks and failures brought him **face to face with the weaknesses and inadequacies that lay within**, so "God's power [could be] made perfect in [his] weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Until we've learned that we won't get very far forward. One of the abiding glories of the gospel is that **it brings us face to face with certain realities about ourselves and others**. We must face the truth.

Christ knew the disciples hadn't caught any fish. He knew everything else about them. It is to the disciples' eternal credit that when asked about their catch, **they admitted they'd caught nothing**, not even a teeny-weeny minnow. That is what Christ sanctified. Failure can be the most creative thing in life, especially for the believer. But we must have the grace to admit it and the humility to receive its creative benefits.

### 3. **The church's faithfulness** (John 21:6-8).

**Then what? Follow where the Lord leads.** Jesus tells them to throw the net on the right side of the boat for that's where they'd find some fish (21:6). So they did. And when **John** saw the net tighten with the great weight of the fish, he looked back at the figure on the shoreline and suddenly recognized it was Jesus Christ on the shore! (21:7a). **Peter**, also, all action, put on some clothes because he'd been working naked, and cannon-balled into the water, and swam, pell-mell, to be the first to greet his Lord! (21:7b). So quickly enough, he stood in front of Jesus, with a dripping beard and matted hair, smiling his big, toothy grin! **The other disciples**, dutiful as ever, nameless, brought the boat, full of fish, as near as possible to the shore (21:8).

The fishermen, a picture of the church toiling on the restless seas of life, found **it was Jesus Christ who brings the increase**. They also found that **his resources were truly sufficient**. A wise commentator discusses with apt insight that **the net**, in contrast to the description of the parallel situation of fishing success presented earlier in the Gospel, **didn't break in this case** (1979, p. 868). With Christ directing the work, the resources are never overstrained. **Nothing, with a group of people working together, is beyond God's power and grace**. Serving Christ in our own strength, trying to do it our own way, is like going after the whale, Moby Dick, with a pickle fork. But **led and sustained by Christ's strength, our net will never tear**.

#### 4. **The church's reward** (John 21:9-14).

“When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught’” (21:9-10). There is a marvelous, mysterious air about this section. It is, first and foremost, **another instance of Jesus appearing to his disciples, satisfying their basic needs** for famished hunger and for eager fellowship with him.

It is also a picture of **the church receiving her eternal reward**. As an older illustrator of Scripture, **Alexander Maclaren**, once remarked,

All the details, such as the solid shore in contrast with the changeful sea, the increasing morning [dawning] in contrast with the toilsome night, the feast prepared, have been from of old consecrated to shadow forth the differences between earth and heaven. It would be blindness not to see here a prophecy of the glad hour when Christ shall welcome to their home, amid the brightness of unsetting day, the souls that have served him amid the fluctuations and storms of life, and [that have] seen him in its darkness, and [he] shall satisfy all their desires with the “bread of heaven.”

(Expositions of Holy Scripture, 1965, Vol. 11, p. 356)

Though we now serve him on the uncertain seas of life, our risen Lord wants us to know he is on the eternal shore, in the ever-increasing light, preparing a table for us. **He wants us to see that our works for him are of eternal value**. He encourages his disciples to **bring some of their catch**. He accepts their work and adds the result of their work to the provision he's already prepared. I suppose he didn't need their contribution. He could've multiplied what he already had; he'd done that several times before when he

multiplied a few loaves and fishes (Mk. 6:35ff; Matt. 14:17; 15:32ff; Lk. 9:12ff; Jn. 6:5ff). But he was teaching them, and us, that **Christian believers' works are valued by him and are of eternal consequence.** Service rendered to Christ is eternal. The tiniest and the greatest work done under the inspiration of Jesus Christ is more enduring than anything else. The apostle Paul echoes this truth when he concludes his great chapter on the resurrection, "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord, your labour is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

We are all **in the same boat**, riding the same waters. The present age is an age of darkness, and the waters are sometimes cold and harsh, even stormy and overwhelming.

All those in the boat are to **be involved** in fishing and casting and recasting our nets.

As Christ's followers we are all called to **face realities**, to be honest about what's really happening in our lives. And, as believers, the most creative, life-giving words we may ever utter are, "**I have caught nothing.**"

As Christ's followers there must also be a willingness to engage in hard work, to **keep the boat afloat and going**, fulfilling its purpose. There must be a commitment to be prepared to change our ways and ideas, an obedience to respond to the his call, and to follow through when the way is clear, and with that will come a great catch, a catch that will bless us into eternity and beyond.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg  
Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC  
April 18, 2010, The Second Sunday after Easter