

Third Sunday of Easter; May 4, 2025
+ John 21:1-14 +
“The Most Important Meal”

After this, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberia. This is how he showed himself: Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, “I’m going fishing.”

They replied, “We’ll go with you.”

They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus was standing on the shore, but the disciples did not know it was Jesus.

Jesus called to them, “Boys, don’t you have any fish?”

“No!” they answered.

He told them, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” So they cast the net out. Then they were not able to haul it in because of the large number of fish.

The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard, “It is the Lord!” he tied his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the little boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about one hundred yards. When they stepped out on land, they saw some bread and a charcoal fire with fish on it. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you just caught.”

So Simon Peter climbed aboard and hauled the net to land, full of large fish, 153 of them. Yet even with so many, the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, “Come, eat breakfast.”

None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord.

Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them, and also the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Just to make sure we get to it before we run out of time, we had better start with the big question. Every time this Gospel is preached, or taught to adults or to a Sunday School Sunday class, you know the one question that someone is going to ask every single time: “Why 153 fish?” So, fear not; I have researched and know the answers. Here’s a rundown:

According to St. Cyprian, 100 fish symbolize the large number of Gentiles who were to be saved, 50 the smaller number of Jews, and 3 the Triune God who would save them. According to St. Jerome, there are a total of 153 kinds of fish in the whole world, so 153 pictures the truth that God will save people from all the peoples of the world. And then there’s this explanation, from the Fuller University website: [“Pythagoras was associated with catches of fish,”](#) and he had calculated that 153 is the denominator of the closest known fraction to the square root of 3 (265/153), and this was also the ratio of a fish shape drawn between two overlapping circles which are centered on each other’s circumference. This shape is therefore known as the *vesica piscis* and the ratio was called by Pythagoras the ‘measure of

the fish'. If the two circles [represent God and humanity](#), then the overlap represents Jesus as God incarnate, along with his followers, whose sign becomes the sign of the fish.

I don't know about any of that, and neither do they, really. The only answer we can give for sure is this: 153 a number; it's a precise number – no rounding, no estimating. The disciples caught 153 big fish because that's the exact number Jesus wanted his boys to catch.

It's not charitable to assume those disciples gathered on the shore of Galilee were doubting or disbelieving that Jesus was alive, as Thomas had before. It's also unkind to assume that they were grieving or afraid, as the rest had had been on Easter night. But this much you can tell from the way they react to Jesus' appearance: They wanted – and needed – to see him alive again, for the third time.

He had been laid on his back, dead in a tomb. After three days, early in the morning, he got up on his feet, alive, and left the tomb. And now, here he is again, again early in the morning, standing on his feet, alive, by the Sea of Galilee.

At first, they do not know it was Jesus, because most living people can stand on a shore. That's not exactly distinctive. But there's only one kind of person who can stand alive on a shore and decide that fishers with no fish will catch exactly 153 big fish if they just throw their net out the other side of their little boat. The only living person who can stand on a shore alive and decide that is the living person who once was dead and came back to life.

The disciples must at least suspect it is the Lord. Why else would they follow this otherwise bizarre command, if they do not at least suspect the One speaking is the same one who three years earlier gave them a very similar command in a very similar place? And when the results this time are as miraculous as they were that time, then the disciples know for sure: it's Jesus.

And now it's time for the disciples to make their approach to Jesus. Most of them stay in the boat to make their approach, because they now have a valuable haul of exactly 153 big fish. But one of them, Peter, doesn't wait for all that. He jumps in the lake and swims to Jesus. The disciple who needs to be with Jesus most desperately approaches Jesus most eagerly. And if there were a shark between Peter and the shore, that shark would be in serious danger!

We know where to find our risen, living Jesus. We find him in this Gospel, throughout the Gospels, in the whole Word of God, under bread and wine, and in each swim of baptism's water. How do we approach the living, risen, Jesus? Does your enthusiasm for Word and sacrament match Peter's? Do you jump in the lake to get to the Jesus in his Word? We should remember that we need Jesus as much as Peter did, because we are just as sinful as he was. Peter was an overconfident denier who needed to be forgiven and to be restored to the ranks of the apostles. And Jesus will do that for him this very morning. We are also proud sinners who have failed to speak up for our Savior. We need him as much as Peter. So we should learn from Peter's approach to Jesus and go, man, go. Go because Jesus is there in Word and Supper and sinners need to be with him; just go because it's so very good to be with the risen, living Jesus.

Jesus has a meal of bread and fish already prepared for the disciples. This is one reason it's so good to be with him: he keeps his promise to supply what you need for your physical life. I'm sure those disciples are starving after fishing all night. And Jesus is there to feed their bodies. But it is more than that! Jesus also feeds them with the honor and satisfaction of giving him a gift. He asks for and receives some of the fish they just caught – even though he clearly does not need them, and they wouldn't even have those fish if

Jesus hadn't decided that they would catch exactly 153 of them! But he takes their gift because of who he is: the One who gave them the faith to listen to his command and keep casting, the One who takes good things from his people into nail-marked hands.

And it's good to be with the risen, living Jesus for this most important reason of all: Not only does he give you what your body needs, not only does he take your gifts graciously, but he also feeds you with forgiveness and life. When you are with the risen Jesus, you see in his living body the finished sacrifice for your sins. You see in his living body how certain the promise is that because he lives, you live.

Jesus feeds the disciples with forgiveness and eternal life. And that is also their strength to go out and do the work Jesus has given them to do. He has given them another kind of fishing to do: for people – and a whole lifetime's worth of it. They now go out and fish for people with all their hearts, as Jesus' forgiven friends. They go out and fish for people with all their hearts, knowing they will live even when they die. "If you want to martyr me, could we flip the cross upside down? But otherwise, go on ahead." That's what Peter said. That's knowing where you're headed. They fish hard and fearlessly until it is time to go and be with Jesus again, together with all his friends, at another meal already prepared for them.

Today your risen, living Jesus is here. He is here to feed you what you need for your physical life. He is here to feed with the honor of giving him good things – things he does not need from you, things you wouldn't have in the first place if he didn't decide you would. But he'll take them from you because of who he is. Today he feeds you with forgiveness and life forever in his once-sacrificed, ever-living body.

These gifts are your strength to go and do the work he has given you to do. You are not an apostle, but you're on the team; you're in the fishing party. That's one work Jesus given you to do: fish for people with his love, and do it with all your heart as his forgiven friend. What else has he called you to be and do? Listen to him tell you how he wants you to do it, and then do it with all your heart, until it's time to be with him and all his friends on high, at the meal he's prepared on high for us all.

Dear Jesus, bring us, your friends, eagerly to your living self and feed us. Amen.