

JOHN 21:1–14. (EHV)

After this, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. 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.

What is it about fishing?

Not all fishermen are the same. Some like to sit in the sun for hours on end with a hook, worm, and bobber in the water and a cold drink in their hand. Some like to cast and reel, cast and reel, each time finessing their cast a little more so that their lure lands in the perfect spot.

Some like to meticulously tie artificial flies or other bugs in their basements, and then wade upstream or downstream continuously weaving beautiful figure-8s above their heads as they thread their line out farther and farther until the fly finally gently lands on the desired pool. I once saw a fly-fisherman working his line back and forth beneath a rocky cliff near a farmer's pasture against a setting sun on an autumn evening, and if that wasn't more beautiful than any painting on earth, I don't know what is.

Other fishing is much less finesse. In musky fishing, fishermen heave huge lures the size of small dogs from 7- to 10-foot rods in a general direction as far as they can, which land with big awkward splashes before being retrieved. But if you've ever seen a musky fisherman land a large musky after hundreds if not thousands of casts, you know that there is both art, skill, and excitement involved there too.

Not all fishermen are the same. But all these different kinds of fishermen find a similar satisfaction in what they do. Perhaps this is it: Fishing gives a person all of the satisfaction of work together with all of the relaxation and refreshment of rest, with the scenery or the camaraderie often playing a significant role. Fishing can never be mastered; even after a successful day, the fisherman dreams of doing better next time. And at the end of an unsuccessful

day, even if he hasn't caught a thing, the fisherman still goes to bed happier than he would have if he hadn't gone fishing.

Now combine that with breakfast, which is personally my favorite meal of the day.

Now combine all of that with Jesus, Jesus risen from the dead.

Jesus had made his disciples a promise on Holy Thursday evening: "After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." We finally hear how he kept that promise today. And as John records the details of the story about half a century or more after the fact, you can tell that for him, it's like it just happened yesterday.

Jesus had appeared to his disciples as a group twice—once on the evening of Easter Sunday, and once a week later. They now knew that they were supposed to meet Jesus in Galilee and that they would meet him in Galilee, but they didn't know when or how. Jesus wasn't walking around with them any more. He was the same, but different. He went in and out, appeared and disappeared at will.

So there seven of them were, sitting around, twiddling their thumbs, and Peter couldn't take it any more. "I'm going fishing," he said.

And the other six who were with him said, "We're coming along too." So they went down to the lake—Peter, doubting Thomas, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, James and John the sons of Zebedee, and two others who are not named.

There were different kinds of fishing. There was seine fishing where you drop a large net with floats at the top and weights at the bottom and then draw the ends together to encircle and trap the fish. There was gill net fishing where you drop a similarly weighted net, but then you drift with it or leave it in place for a while and the fish simply get caught in it by their gills or fins.

And there was cast net fishing. A cast net, when you throw it, opens up so that it lands in a circle. Weights around the perimeter cause the net to sink and close together. A hand line is attached to the caster's wrist on the one end and to the center of the net on the other and is used to retrieve the net.

It's clear that these seven disciples were cast net fishing, since they were *throwing* the net, which you don't do with a seine net or a gill net. But how is a little more difficult to answer, because there were seven of them in the boat, but we only hear about one net. Perhaps this was a larger cast net designed to be thrown by several men working together. Or perhaps several of them took turns throwing one net, since throwing a cast net requires both considerable space and energy.

There are some disadvantages to fishing with a cast net. It's easy to be seen and it makes considerable noise when all the weights land on the water, so it spooks the fish easily. It's also difficult to use on a windy day. So the disciples went in the evening and fished through the night, when they could enjoy both invisibility and calm conditions. They didn't go out far, only about a hundred yards from shore. A cast net is only effective in a depth equal to or less than its radius.

And they cast. And they cast. Keep in mind that at least three and as many as five of these seven men in the boat had been professional fishermen once upon a time. They caught nothing all night.

As the darkness was breaking and sunlight was creeping up on the edge of the eastern horizon, a man appeared on shore. The disciples noticed he was there watching them, but they didn't give him any attention at first. Finally Jesus broke the morning silence: "Boys, don't you have any fish?"

If the men had listened carefully to his question, they might have guessed who the man was. He didn't ask them if they had any fish. He asked them to confirm that they didn't have any, even though they clearly knew what they were doing and he was a hundred yards away, indicating his knowledge as God. But you can tell how invested the disciples were in their task, and how frustrated they were with it, by their answer. They simply reply, "No."

"Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." Why the disciples would listen to this man on shore they didn't recognize, I don't know. Perhaps it was the confidence and authority with which he told them to do it. Whatever the case, they retrieved the net, gathered it up, divided it in half, rotated, and let it fly on the right side. It sailed into the air, opening wide.

If I pause from my work in the office for too long and let my mind wander, it will often go back to August 4 and 5, 2016, in western Montana. The spruce moths were coming down from the spruce trees, and the trout were feasting on them. On August 4 around 11 a.m., I was standing in the middle of a mountain river in front of some big, splashy rapids that emptied into a deep hole. I tied on a spruce moth pattern and caught nice rainbow trout, brown trout, and cutthroat trout out of the same hole. After trout number 9, I was tired and it was time for lunch, so I called it quits for the day. I cleaned two of the trout and fried them up for lunch, and then Katie and I went for a hike. I came back to that hole early the next morning to catch number 10. After I did, I was completely content and sang a hymn out loud on the way back to the vehicle, which rang out in the valley as the morning sunlight crested the mountain peaks.

That was the fishing thrill of my life. Ten fish. Ten!

The cast net landed. As the weights began to sink, 153 large fish, probably a sort of tilapia, thronged into the net. The disciple with the hand line gave a tug.

Maybe John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was the man with the hand line. And when he tugged at that line to pull the net in, his mind immediately went back three years to another day he was on the Sea of Galilee. He and his brother James had to take their boat and go over to help Peter and Andrew in their boat, where Jesus also was, because they had so many fish in their net that it began to tear (Luke 5:1–11). And in that moment, John knew two things. He knew not only that he was not going to be able to draw in the hand line by himself, but he also knew who the man on shore was. So as he and the others were heaving, he turned to Peter, "It is the Lord." He turned back to keep heaving, but now the net seemed even heavier. Suddenly there was a large splash. Peter had cast himself in.

Those of you who fish, you know that feeling when your line suddenly moves or your bobber goes down or there's a splash on your topwater lure, and you set the hook. That moment, when you tug, and there's resistance, and you know something big and alive is on the end of your line—that feeling is one of the primary reasons you go fishing. Each one of the seven disciples in that boat now had that feeling as they tugged on the hand line together. And so I'm not sure what's more miraculous—the fact that their cast net had 153 large fish in it and didn't lose any of

them, or the fact that after feeling that tug, the hand line lost a fisherman, and one who had done it for a living.

It would be like if a musky fisherman laid into a seventy-pounder, and after the hook was firmly set, he threw his rod into the lake, started his motor, and drove home. Or if a trout fisherman landed his fly perfectly and watched an 18-inch brown trout erupt from the water and engulf his fly and then set his doubled-over rod down on a rock and waded to shore to go for a hike. Or if a small boy hooked a 20-inch smallmouth bass from a pier, and then dropped his rod and went to play with his friends. It just doesn't happen. But here it does. Peter took only the time it needed to put his outer garment back on so that he would be presentable before his Lord, and then he jumped in. He didn't care about the fish one bit.

And when Peter arrived on shore, and when the other six eventually arrived, towing the net behind them, what they found was a fire of coals, perfect for cooking, that already had a fish on it. And Jesus had bread there too. Because of the way Jesus did things after he rose, I wouldn't be surprised if he just made the fish appear there on the burning coals. But I also wouldn't be surprised if, before Jesus appeared on shore, he went to his own quiet place on shore, fashioned a willow rod, caught a fish at dawn, cleaned it, built a fire, fried up some bread, and started cooking the fish, and *then* went to ask his disciples about their lack of fish—his own “What this planet might have been if humans hadn't fallen into sin” moment in his resurrected glory before returning to heaven.

Jesus told them, “Bring some of the fish you just caught.” As eager as Peter had been, the others had been eager too. Apparently, once they arrived on shore, they simply hooked the hand line on the boat and jumped out, leaving the net in the water. So Peter scrambled back into the boat and unhooked it and dragged it up on shore. The net was not torn, even though the disciples had doubtless done nothing but drag it along the bottom most of the way back. And John couldn't forget the number—153 large fish.

And Jesus cooked some more, and then he invited: “Come and have breakfast.” And he comes and takes the bread and gives it to them, and then he gives them some fish.

And the bread was warm and fresh, and the fish melted in their mouths, and the hills brightened in the distance, and the budding branches gently waved in the breeze, and the golden sun rose in the sky, and the water rippled and sparkled, and it was spring, and they all knew it was Jesus, and Jesus was alive. He had promised to appear to them in Galilee, and here he was. Did breakfast ever taste any better?

I remember hearing about a former missionary's struggles. He was trying to train some men in a foreign country who wanted to be pastors how to preach sermons. They were very good at retelling the Bible stories, but they struggled at applying them. They struggled saying, “This is what this means.”

But when he shared his teaching struggles with another missionary, the other missionary thought for a while and said, “I wonder, in a culture that revolves around stories and is saturated with stories, if the telling of the story *is* the application?”

If that can be true for a story in any culture, wouldn't it be this one? Brothers and sisters, can you feel the morning sunlight? Can you see the water sparkling? Can you taste the bread and the fish? Can you see the smiles of all the men as they look at the man who cooked them

breakfast and know for a fact that it's Jesus? Can you see the happiness on Jesus's face as he takes satisfaction in their physical and spiritual enjoyment of this spring morning? Can't you see him saying it with his eyes? "Tastes good, doesn't it, boys?" Can't you hear it in the look beaming from his face? "Everything is going to be alright in the end."

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! The disciples had the catch of fish and the breakfast to prove it. Jesus is alive. He keeps his promises. He forgives our sins. He provides for our needs. He gives us peace. He gives us life, life eternal. The night is ending. The dawn is breaking. Jesus is waiting for us on the shore. And what he has prepared for us there—boy, is it going to taste good.

And this is no fishing tale. "After this, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how he did it." This is a true story about your risen Savior. Amen.