

**John 21:1-14**  
**Holy Humor Sunday**  
**April 7, 2024**  
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Laughter will not solve all the world's problems; they will still be waiting for us when worship is over. But it is good to laugh and to remind ourselves that following the ways of Jesus brings life, love, hope, and joy. I firmly believe the world doesn't need a bunch of miserable Christians and misery doesn't exactly draw people to want to share in what we are doing. The world needs people who will serve with joy, and hopefully, that joy will be contagious.

Today's text is the story of one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. We should engage these stories as opportunities to explore what it meant that the love and hope Jesus put into the world was still alive after his death 2000 years ago and what it means for us that it is still alive today. Love is alive, hope is alive, and so is joy!

I think we can have some fun with today's story.

This is John 21:1-14.

...Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he showed himself in this way. <sup>2</sup>Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. <sup>3</sup>Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. <sup>4</sup>Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." <sup>6</sup>He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. <sup>7</sup>That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he had taken it off, and jumped into the sea. <sup>8</sup>But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. <sup>9</sup>When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." <sup>11</sup>So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them, and though there were so many, the net was not torn. <sup>12</sup>Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. <sup>13</sup>Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. <sup>14</sup>This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

It had been an intense time for Jesus' followers. During Holy Week, we walked through the days that led up to Jesus' death; we heard again the story of how he was killed, and last week, we celebrated the disciples' discovery that parts of Jesus were still alive in the world after his death. But the heaviness remained. As his disciples began

to live their lives after Jesus' death, they found that things were not the same. I am sure they were sad; maybe every day was a struggle just to get out of bed. The glue that held them together was gone. There was fear in the air, and they still didn't completely understand what had happened. How had things gone so horribly wrong?

Since Jesus' death, they had experienced his presence, but that presence didn't linger. He was there, and then he was gone. Yet, they were still there, living under the Roman Empire's thumb. This was not what they had planned. And Peter...he was struggling. Undoubtedly, he wished Jesus' prediction, that he would deny him three times, had been wrong. But he had been right. He was always right. Now Jesus was gone, and Peter was left with guilt and shame that did linger.

He couldn't stand one more day just sitting around wishing things were different and longing for a do-over. He was ready to try to move on. So, Peter went back to what he knew: fishing. Allen Dwight Callahan, in his chapter on John in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, notices that the disciples in the boat don't seem just to be fishing for themselves. The fact that they were trolling with a net suggests that they planned to catch a lot of fish, enough to sell. Basically, these fishermen, whom Jesus had called to be "fishers of men," had gone back to fishing for fish. They needed safety and security. They needed the money.<sup>1</sup> And truthfully, who can blame them?

In the story, fishing for fish that night ends up almost as difficult as fishing for people. They didn't catch anything. These were professional fishermen who fished for hours and caught nothing, not even one little fish that could have been the focus of an exaggerated fish story when they got home.

My friend, Jim, got up bright and early one weekend and headed to the local river. He fished all day long but didn't catch a thing. On the way home, he stopped at the fish market.

"I want to buy the three biggest catfish you've got," he said to the owner.

The owner starts to bag up his order when Jim says, "No need for that, just throw them at me."

"Why would I do that?" the owner asked.

"So I can tell my wife that I caught three fish today!"

Back to the disciples...deciding to call it quits, their attention was drawn to a man on the shore. We, as the reader, know it was Jesus, but the disciples didn't, which makes Jesus' question, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" funny. I mean...it's Jesus. He knew they had been fishing all night; he knew they hadn't caught anything, and yet, he asked. Can you imagine the grin on his face as he poked fun at them? Jesus forced them to admit out loud that their fishing for fish had been a bust.

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<sup>1</sup> Callahan, Allen Dwight. "John" in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Edited by Brian K. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice Jannette Martin, Emerson B. Powery. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

Here is a little note that you may not find as interesting as I do, but as scholars have studied the words in the New Testament attributed to Jesus to learn which ones were likely to have been said by him, they have determined that this story was borrowed from a similar story in Luke as Luke was written first, so likely it was more of a common lore story...a legend. But the author of John, with this bit of humor from Jesus, has imagined how this story would have gone. You see, as scholars have dug into the authentic words of Jesus, they have found that he used humor, sarcasm, and irony often. And I love that.

After the disciples admitted their night of fishing had yielded nothing, Jesus suggested that they cast the net on the right side of the boat, and suddenly, their nets were full! It is then, in that moment of abundance, that the "beloved disciple," the one who, at least in this gospel, figured everything out first, recognized Jesus' presence. "It's the Lord," he said to Peter and Peter put on his outer garment and jumped into the water and swam to Jesus. Peter didn't hesitate; he just got in the water, eager to be face-to-face with Jesus.

It isn't random that the author of John has Jesus show up in the abundance of a full net of fish. Jesus has shown up before in moments like these: at the wedding in Cana when he turned water to wine, he fed 5000 people with some bread and fish, and in chapter 10 of the Gospel of John, he comes right out and says, "I have come to give you abundant life." Jesus shows up to remind his followers that whenever we experience abundance, God is there. God is there when we experience enough and more than enough. God is there when we have plenty to eat and when we have more than enough to share. God is there when we know we are loved and when we share that love with our neighbors. God is there when our hearts are filled with joy and when we serve other people with those joyful hearts.

At the end of our text this morning, Jesus did what Jesus does: He invited them to a meal. "Come and have some breakfast!" He made sure everyone ate. There was bread and fish, and there was enough for everyone. He reminds us that God does that. God invites us back for a meal again and again, at our best and at our worst. Now, if I had written this story, I would have added what they talked about while they ate. I would have written about how Jesus teased the disciples about being so quick to give up on what they started with him. And I probably would have had him say something like, "And to be clear, it doesn't seem like y'all are very good at catching fish anyway, so you might as well just keep at what we were doing together."

Friends, we live in a world where scarcity seems to be all around us. Creatures are going extinct; people don't have enough to eat or clean water to drink, and our neighbors are lonely and feel isolated. Joy and love feel scarce in so many ways, so many people feel hopeless. But we cannot let fear keep us from who we are called to be and what we are called to do. As followers of Jesus, we are supposed to bring joy

and love to the world. Sometimes, to do that, all we have to do is smile or tell a joke, or as Jesus did, help someone remember not to take themselves too seriously. But sometimes, that work requires more. At times, it feels like too much. That's why we have each other: to encourage one another, to remind each other to laugh, to have fun together, and to fill each other with joy and love so that we can leave here ready to share it with the world. When we do that, we are continuing what Jesus started. So, let's do that. Amen.