

*The Opening of Eyes: Again*  
John 21:1-14

Last week I asked you, on the connection card, to write down your first reaction to the news of a police shooting of another unarmed black man in Minneapolis. It's a little hard to remember now, because there's been so much news *this* week, but the week before this one, Daunté Wright was killed just as the trial for George Floyd was ending, not 20 miles away from that same courthouse. I asked you that question because I was tired and discouraged, and I wondered if you felt the same way I did. I asked because there is comfort just in hearing someone else say 'Me too.'

And that's what you said. Your responses on that card last Sunday said that we shared that day a gloom that our country cannot seem to find its way out of the plague of systemic racism that is as relentless and powerful as pandemic, acting itself out on black bodies, staining the soul of us all. A disease we keep thinking we can fix with good intentions and more awareness. As if we are waiting for some dramatic breakthrough that will work like a vaccine.

This week there was a moment of lightness, in the jury verdict that convicted a police officer of murder. We were grateful; if not joyful then at least relieved. Nine minutes of actual video and weeks of eyewitness testimony could not be denied. The eyes of twelve jurors were not so clouded that they could not see the truth we saw too.

But it didn't take long for an honest, harder reflection to set in. One jury verdict, convicting one extraordinarily bad police officer, does not accomplish justice or change a system. This week's decision will not break the cycle of violence against people of color. Elie Mystal, a columnist for *The Nation*, wrote this week, "It is literally already too late for George Floyd to be the last unarmed Black man to be murdered by criminal police action."

He went on to say, "The Chauvin conviction is important, but it's not repeatable. It's a floor, not a ladder. George Floyd's family can finally begin the process of healing. They have received some measure of justice, and hopefully they can find peace. The rest of us have to get back to work."

It might take a miracle to end the cycle of violence that continues to see black people as internal enemies of civil society in America; but it will not be God's miracle alone. Do we have it in us to come together with a single mind about this, with enough energy to do the work it will take to detach ourselves from the long legacy of racism in this country?

Honestly, I don't know. There's not a lot of reason for optimism about this. Maybe the dimness in my eyes is what makes the post-resurrection story we read this morning feel so identifiable.

This story too starts in discouragement.

The disciples have gone back to fishing. Not the kind of day-off fishing you do when you're feeling good and ready for a day of relaxation. For them, fishing was a trade, their livelihood, the kind of daily work they could do with their eyes closed. The kind of work they'd done *before* Jesus had called them to join a mission, to be part of a movement that was new, exciting, possibly world-changing. Their return to fishing tells us they were feeling useless and discouraged, at loose ends, not sure at all of who they were. There were some good days that had interrupted their regular lives. Moments when they'd seen for themselves: thousands of people fed with what started out as just a little bit of food. There were even a couple of times recently when Jesus weirdly showed up, almost like he wasn't dead. But now they could see: they were no more than what they had always been—common fishermen. Like every other fisherman, they depended on whatever the tide brought in that day to feed themselves and their families. They went back to their old lives because they were no longer sure that there *was* a new life to be pursued. Maybe it had all been crazy hope fueled by a guy with great charisma and not much else.

So they went fishing. Back to what they knew how to do. My whole life, whenever I've felt depressed or discouraged, my mother has said to me, "Go home and wash the kitchen floor," or "Make cookies." Which is another way of saying, do what you know how to do. It will make you feel better about yourself.

Only on this night, it seems, *nothing* will make those disciples feel better. They've fished all night, as professional fisher-people do, and they haven't caught a thing. It's daybreak now. They're ready to wrap it up and declare defeat when they see someone on the shore, waving at them. "Caught any fish, boys?" this stranger yells at them; and they must have rolled their eyes at that, because who likes to be reminded of their failures? "Throw your nets on the *other* side of the boat," he calls back. And they do it because—well, why not?

And suddenly, unexplainably, impossibly, their nets are filled with fish. Something clicks. It's *Jesus* who's shouting at them from the shore. So Peter—because he's always the impetuous one among them, the one who's least likely to stay until the nets are all cleaned and folded up and back in their places—Peter jumps in the water and swims to shore. They all follow, dragging those nets full of fish.

When they get to the beach, there's a fire burning, and fish that's already cleaned and ready to eat, and toast. And Jesus. He says, "Bring some of your fish too." So they put together the fresh fish that the disciples had just caught and the fish and bread that Jesus somehow found; and they have a fine breakfast on the beach.

There are a lot of things you could say about this story. Whole sermons have been preached on the secret meaning of John's note that there were 153 fish in those full nets that got dragged ashore. 153 exactly. What's that about? There have been a lot of theories over the centuries. Some have said 153 was the total number of species known in the biological science of the time. 153 is the number you get if you remember that there are ten commandments and seven gifts of

the Holy Spirit (which makes 17) and then you add the total of all the integers between 1 and 17. There you go. Or you could just say 153 is a lot of fish.

But this morning I want to stick with just one other piece of this story that's far less mysterious than the number 153.

It's the disciples themselves, those seven guys who got in that little boat to go fishing, feeling as discouraged as you and I can sometimes feel about the whole enterprise. It struck me, as I was writing this sermon, that there are no stories in the Gospels about Jesus running into relentless optimists, people who manage to stay cheerful and hopeful no matter what happens. I wonder whether that's because interacting with Jesus, maybe even seeing him, requires a crack in your shell, an openness that neither cynics nor stubbornly positive thinkers can allow themselves.

These disciples were disheartened. They'd been as close to Jesus as anyone could be, and still they'd lost the thread of it. They couldn't find their way back to hope. They couldn't remember what it was Jesus had called them to, why they'd spent years of their lives working on some vision that now looked clearly unaccomplishable. A whole night of fishing and no fish.

And then, from a faceless stranger standing on the beach, not even a fisherman himself apparently, came a random, unsolicited piece of advice. *Throw your nets down again.* The words rattled in Peter's head. He'd heard them before. Way back, recorded in Luke's Gospel, those were the very same words that Jesus had said the day he and Peter met. That day too, Peter was done with a night of fishing. He'd been washing his nets, swabbing down the deck of his boat, ready to go home, when a teacher appeared and offered another piece of random, unsolicited advice. 'Row out again, into deeper water this time. Drop your nets, and let's see what happens.' That day too, just like this one, the catch was so large that the nets almost tore.

Dropping their nets again on this morning, after Jesus died, must have felt to Peter like déjà vu.

If you've been here with us the last couple of Sundays, you've heard some similar stories. Pastor Jeremy retold the story of Thomas seeing Jesus after the resurrection; how Jesus came back to the room where Thomas joined the disciples after he'd missed the first meeting. How Jesus greeted Thomas with the exact same words he'd said to the others. Like instant replay, just for Thomas. Last week we talked about the two disciples who retreated to Emmaus after Jesus died, and who didn't recognize Jesus even when they walked and talked with him for two hours. It was familiar movements as he handed them bread and cup that gave away his identity.

Maybe every interaction with the risen Christ plays in us like an echo. Reminds his followers of something they have heard or seen before. My teacher Richard Rohr says that every encounter with God is recognition. Literally *re-cognition*, knowing something we already sensed but had not yet fully taken in.

What Peter and the others needed, and got, that morning was a repeated call. *Another* invitation into Jesus' elusive, sometimes impossible-feeling project of reshaping the world. An echo of what had first inspired them.

That's what I need too, maybe especially now, when everything feels hard. Because I am always prone to go back to what I already know how to do. Because no inspiration lasts forever. Because no calling, however noble or true, is immune from discouragement. Because it is always possible to lose the thread.

So listen for it. Probably not when you're surging with triumph, but at some moment when you feel like you've gotten lost...again. There's Jesus, or maybe just some vague shape of Jesus, some distance away. 'Try fishing on the *other* side of the boat,' he says. I'm here, still inviting you; still needing you to do this impossible-seeming work with me. Don't give up. Stay with me. Are you hungry? I'll make breakfast.