

In a seaside town, there was a great fisherman. Somewhat of a local legend because he always caught lots of fish. A stranger arrived, heard the stories of this legend and wanted some 'fishing' action, so he approached the fisherman. He pleaded with him to take him fishing.

As the boat left the dock the stranger noticed that this fisherman didn't have any rods with him, only a large tackle box and a big net on the end of a pole. The stranger mentioned this oversight, but the fisherman assured him that he had everything he needed for a sizeable catch.

Before long, the boat pulled into a sheltered cove and the fisherman dropped anchor. The stranger watched wide eyed as the fisherman opened his tackle box, pulled out a stick of dynamite, tied it to a brick, lit the fuse and lobbed it over the side.

A few seconds later, there was a muffled explosion followed by a plume of shooting water. Dozens of dead fish floated to the surface and the fisherman grabbed his net. The stranger had seen enough. "Hold on!" he shouted as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his ID. "I'm the new game keeper and you've been caught red-handed. You know, very well, it's against the law to blow up fish!"

The fisherman didn't miss a beat. He reached over to his tackle box, took out another stick of dynamite, lit the fuse and handed it to the stunned game keeper: "Now," said the fisherman, "are you going to fish or are you just stand there?"

In our scripture today, let's make all of the disciples the star of the story. They are choking on their doubts, their misunderstandings, their disbelief in the resurrection of Jesus. Even after they were visited not once but twice by the risen Jesus.

Am I the only one who thinks that in our passage today they still don't understand. They still don't believe that Jesus is alive. They can't fathom the idea that Jesus rose from the dead. They were still struggling with doubts, struggling with the appearance of Jesus, struggling with their thoughts of how this could possibly be true. It was way too much, way too fast.

The last three years of their life were spent wandering, preaching, giving up their homes, leaving security and a comfortable way of life. All to live with this preacher from Nazareth who made their life - anything but comfortable.

First, they preached to all kinds of people. Then, they stirred up the religious leaders. And this Jesus performed miracles that made them uncomfortable. He told them things that made them uneasy. In last few weeks, things got downright rough. Soldiers arrested him. A speedy trial found Jesus guilty and sentenced to death. When he died on the cross, the disciples thought it was all over.

What else to do but go back to their old jobs. But then the women. Those women. They came and told them he was not dead, he was alive. The grave was empty. Life was still changing way too fast. They barely had time to accept his death and now they were told that Jesus was alive? That he appeared to these women? That he talked to them?

Then Jesus appeared to them. Not once, but twice. He even said he was coming back again. But was it really him? Were they dreaming? Was it really Jesus?

Peter. Good old impulsive Peter. He suggests that they go fishing. You know what he was really saying? Let's go back to something we understand, something we know, something we are familiar with. Something we're good at. Let us go back to the security of our old jobs, the security of our families, the security of the familiar.

Today there are opinions on what going back meant for the disciples. Some say they didn't go fishing to abandon Jesus, but to get a handle on their fast-changing lives.

Others say this was a move of open rebellion. They didn't understand what was happening. They were confused. The struggle just didn't seem worth it anymore. So why not go back to something they knew, something comfortable, something they didn't need to struggle with.

Could it be a little of both? I mean, they really needed to get out of that upper room. They were outdoor men, comfortable with outside; used to making decisions outside. So why not go back

to a familiar way of faith, a way to struggle with their doubts, to struggle with the resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps in their fishing they were at a crossroads. Deciding if in spite of everything they would still commit to Jesus.

So this was no ordinary fishing trip. It was a trip with life and death consequences. But it starts with doing their usual thing, fishing at night. Remember they were not amateurs; these guys were professional fisherman. They made their living by fishing. They weren't just working to feed their families they caught enough fish to sell. They were in the business of selling fish. With that in mind, imagine their reaction when they spend the whole night on the boat, and catch no fish. Yes, they'd been away from the trade for 3 years, but they were pros. They needed this night to reinstate confidence and comfort. So imagine how upset they were to catch zero fish.

Here they were professional fisherman, going back to fishing after being away for 3 years, and then they catch nothing. Did they lose their skills? Did they forget to do something important? What if they could never catch fish again?

They get ready to head for shore because dawn is breaking. Then, a stranger calls them and asks if they had caught any fish. They answer no. The stranger tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. Now we aren't going to debate about what happened next. We won't worry about whether Jesus caused the fish to be there, or whether from his vantage point on the shore, he could see a school of fish close to the boat.

The catch itself isn't what's we're focused on today. Sure, they cast their nets into the sea, and caught a whole bunch of fish. 153 according to John. After the catch of fish, John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, recognized that the stranger on the shore as Jesus. He tells impulsive Peter, who puts his clothes on, jumps into the water and swims to shore. Peter finds the risen Jesus with breakfast waiting. Fish and bread, cooking on the fire. Jesus invites the disciples to join him for breakfast and add some of their fish to the meal. Peter drags the heavy net full of fish to the shore and places some fish on the fire. Then they all sit down and eat with Jesus.

This encounter with Jesus is the focus for us today. It was very important for these men, and it tells us something about Jesus. These men were making a decision, struggling with the resurrection, struggling with their faith, wondering if their experience with Jesus was over. Or was this just beginning, as he said more than once. In their struggling, in their doubts, Jesus came to them. He met them where they were. Jesus showed up in the ordinary common tasks of life, to meet them there.

Do you notice what's missing? Condemnation and scolding. They are not in trouble for returning to something familiar like fishing. Jesus accepts them where they are and even invites them to share in a meal.

Recall a meal they ate together only a few days before in the upper room. A meal of reconciliation that brought Jesus and the disciples together. By eating and drinking together, their bonds of trust, friendship and belief were made stronger. So on this day, on a sandy beach in Galilee, they didn't have to ask Jesus if it was truly him. They knew, they knew in their hearts this was Jesus.

Jesus came to these men not to scold, but to reconcile. To show them he had risen and to be there with them because he knew they were struggling. Jesus came to help them make a choice to follow him. Nothing had changed; they were still called to be fishers of men.

I hope as you hear this story, you're considering something. How should we as the body of Christ encounter those who are at crossroads in their lives. Do we pivot to condemnation, judgment and scolding? Or do we act like Jesus did with his disciples when he came to reconcile and ease doubts. When he came in love and to share with them.

Church family every day we encounter people who are struggling with their faith, people who have dropped out. When we do let's remember today's passage and share with them a Jesus' who loves. Those who struggle don't need to be approached with scolding and arguing, and judging. They're already doing a good job there. As Jesus did, can we approach them in love. Can we accept them in their situation and help them to reconcile themselves to Jesus?

There's one more thing to see in this passage. Jesus didn't wait for his disciples to come back to the upper room. He met them where they were, out fishing. He met them on their turf. We too need to encounter people who have or are thinking about dropping out of church by meeting them on their turf. You meet them already, at work, at the gym, at the dog park, in the grocery store. We don't have to wait for the disciples to return to the upper room, to bring the message of reconciliation to them.

Think about someone who you know to be a "dropout"? Would you welcome them back? Would you tell them they've been missed? Would you love them back into our church family?

We who sit here know why being part of a church family is important. There's mutual support for each other. How about being strengthened in your faith. You get to spend time with people who genuinely love you and who you love back. You have a better chance of finding a deeper relationship with Jesus.

What happens if we don't follow Jesus example from today. If we don't care for the "drop-outs" as Jesus did. If we don't "cook a meal" for a drop out the way Jesus did, then we might have more and more people like the people in this poem:

They are always there, usually down in front.

They are uninspiring, nonpaying, silent but disturbing.

They are the moral enemy of the church family.

They never help with singing, never respond to the invitations, they just sit there.

They rob the church of its power, take the joy out of a song, and steal melody out of music.

They chill the saint and cheer the sinner. They don't whisper or squirm, they never look at a clock. They just sit.

They are a visible and a living testimony that someone doesn't feel like they belong. They are evidence of spiritual vice. They are a stabbing pain to Jesus. They cannot be moved. There's only way to get rid of them. Fill them!!!

Who are we speaking of? THE EMPTY seats!!!

Let's fill the empty seats, church family! There are dropouts waiting to be welcomed, waiting to be loved. Let's welcome and love the dropouts! We will welcome and love the dropouts! Let's pray.