

Sermon Preached on May 1, 2022 – Third Sunday of Easter

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St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Acts of the Apostles 9:1-20

Psalm 30

Revelation to John 5:11-14

John 21:1-19

Recommissioned in Christ

Tasha, Karsten and I spent last weekend in Brooklyn.

It's a place that is quite meaningful to Tasha – she lived there for number of years while in grad school and after – and it's a place that I am growing to love.

Brooklyn is a place where you can definitely feel that you are in a big city – it has that buzz – but it's also a place that has quaint neighborhoods and greenspace.

We met up with friends of ours who Tasha met while she was living there and have remained wonderful close friends.

During the pandemic, three of our families have had babies and now there is a fourth on the way – we were in the city to meet those three babies, to shower the parents preparing for the fourth, and introducing them to Karsten.

It.was.fantastic.

The meeting of the babies was the stuff of Hallmark movies and getting to see friends that we hadn't seen since *just* before the pandemic shut down the world filled our cups in major ways.

It was also interesting to just travel at this time.

We stayed in a hotel and I'd say 75% of the people who came down to the breakfast room in the mornings were masked while grabbing their food from the buffet.

Restaurants and stores had signs that either said "masks optional" or "masks highly suggested" and again, it was a mix of whether people wore them.

It was also a gorgeous 65 degree day, so we were able to sit outside at restaurants in these newly constructed outdoor eating huts that the restaurants are petitioning the local politicians to be able to keep.

This was the weekend of the Brooklyn half marathon and we were playing in the park as thousands of runners completed their 13.1 mile journey – the runners didn't have to be masked and the spectators – family and friends with signs and cowbells cheering on the runners – were sometimes masked and sometimes not.

Karsten was so excited to be around so many people who were clapping all the time – he showed off his clapping abilities too.

For Tasha and I it was a successful trip in that we got to see dear, dear friends, we got to get away from Maine for just a little bit (which we all should do sometimes!), Karsten proved how resilient he is and he was such a trooper hanging in his stroller and strolling around the city for a couple days, and we didn't get COVID.

It's hard to believe that not very long ago – these were the same city streets that were deserted.

We walked by the balconies where two years ago New Yorkers would climb out onto and every evening cheer with all the gusto they could summon to recognize the frontline workers, especially nurses and doctors at their shift changes, thanking them for all that they were doing to care for the dying.

This was the same city that turned freezer trucks into morgues to allow their deceased loved ones a place to rest before they were laid to eternal rest.

It was the same physical city, but was it the same city – they were our same friends, but were they the same – Tasha and I brought a new person into the mix, but we're still the same Tasha and Amanda aren't we?

Did that pandemic even really happen?

In today's gospel reading, the disciples decide that after days of agony – the horror of that Friday when their Lord and leader was killed on the cross, that wild Sunday when the tomb was empty, the visit from Jesus in the locked room – after days of trying to make sense of all that they had been through, they decide to “go back to normal” – they decide to go fishing.

If you'll recall from other Bible stories you may have heard before, many of the disciples were fishermen to begin with.

It was another day down by the sea when a traveling prophet came up to them and convinced them to follow him and to fish for people.

What a time they had together – you wouldn't believe the things they did together.

That guy healed people – literally healed them – before their eyes, he preached like no one they had ever heard, he fed crowds of people on just a few simple loaves of bread, he challenged the system in ways it needed to be challenged but in ways none of us would have dared to do it.

But he did it, those disciples had witnessed it, lived it.

The ministry was such a success.

And then everything changed that weekend – like the flip of a light switch.

And now here they are, in the “afterwards” – reeling to know what to do and how to do it.

Do they continue on? Do they go home? Did all of this really happen? Are they still disciples?

So, they go fishing.

But they don't catch anything.

Was it the anguish that distracted them? Or had it been too long since they had actually fished in the sea and just were out of practice? Maybe there just weren't many fish out that night.

They tried so hard to grasp some normalcy, and it seemed to slip through their fingers.

Gosh are we seeking some sense of normalcy after our agony?

I'll tell you there was a part of not wearing my mask all the time in Brooklyn that felt good - it felt real good – and it felt real strange, it felt really vulnerable.

It's like I was grasping normalcy only to feel it disintegrating in my hands as I held on too tightly.

There was a part of me that knew that traveling to Brooklyn wouldn't be the same as it had been in the past, and there was a part of me that hoped that it would be and where those two awarenesses collided, there was grief.

I think most of us at this point in the pandemic have tasted a bit of what the new flavor of life tastes like – we've glimpsed what our new reality might be – but has it really sunk in that it's the new reality, there's no turning back?

The disciples, as they sailed to shore, saw a man who, when he found out they hadn't caught anything all night, convinced them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat.

They agreed and when they cast the net on the right side, it caught so many fish they could barely haul it in.

It was the Lord! It was Jesus! They knew it was him!

Peter swam to shore and the other disciples carefully sailed in with the burgeoning nets.

Jesus invited them to eat with him and so they cooked some of the fish and broke bread with the risen Christ.

In that moment, everything felt right, they were on the shore of the sea – such a familiar landscape – with full nets of fish, sitting by the warmth of their fire eating fresh fish and Jesus was there – their friend, their Lord, their leader, their comfort, their hope, their love – with the holes in his hands and the wound on his side.

In that moment, everything felt as it should – everything would be okay – even though it was different.

Jesus turned to Peter, and I wonder if there was a look that transpired between them – a deep knowing that there was a need for reconciliation.

You'll recall that Jesus told Peter that he would deny him three times before the cock crowed.

Peter of course denied he would do it – how could he? His best friend!

But, as the story tells us, that's exactly what happened.

While his body felt all the warmth of the moment, his heart knew that there was a hole in it.

Three times, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him – just as three times Peter denied his friend.

That’s probably intentional writing – that’s good scriptural symbolism there.

But more than that, it’s so incredibly intimate and personal as you imagine “men as deeply hurt [as they were] groping for a foundation on which they can rebuild together”¹

There is reconciliation in the moment, all will be well, and addressing this hurt had to happen for all to be well.

Karyn Wiseman, a professor of preaching at United Lutheran Seminary in PA, writes that “it is at this meal that [the disciples] receive a recommissioning from the Lord. They are reminded who they are and what they were originally called to be. They are challenged to get back in the boat and try again — in more ways than one.”

Peter is transformed by this moment, all of the disciples are!

Peter and the disciples go from being afraid and huddled in locked rooms to the bold preachers and healers that we hear about in the book of Acts – it’s a remarkable transformation.

Peter goes on to be a great disciple and leader – a founder of the church.

And, I can’t imagine it was possible without this moment of tension, reckoning, and reconciliation, this moment of grasping on to what had been, what had transpired, and releasing it to seek out what will be.

Peter and the disciples tried to “go back to normal” – but the normal that they knew doesn’t exist any more.

Christ did die, the tomb was empty, Christ did rise.

The pandemic did happen, as of last night, 992,000 people have died in the United States, 2,286 in Maine, we did shut down, we did isolate, we did buy groceries with masks on (and gloves at first and then just masks), we did change, we are different.

Christ died, the tomb was empty, Christ did rise.

Is this the moment of our recommissioning?

Is this the moment of re-figuring out our relationship with our calling?

Is this when we throw the nets over the other side of the boat?

Is this when we start discerning not how we can go back in time to what was but how to venture forward in this landscape dreaming of what will be?

When we experience a transformation like the disciples experienced - from huddled in our homes to creating a whole new church?

We will likely live for a while at the intersection of what was and what is – what has been and what will be.

¹ Skinner, Matt. “Less Doing, More Being.” Working Preacher. 24 April 2022. <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/less-doing-more-being>>

We're in the growing pains of new life, new calling, resurrection.

This coming Saturday, the Vestry will gather to think about exactly this – we'll take time to acknowledge all that has happened and we'll start to ask ourselves who are we now?

I think all of us are navigating this in our lives right now, too – we have to acknowledge all that has happened and we have to wonder what is it that comes next? Who are we now?

What a holy intersection we find ourselves in.

Come, have a meal – warm yourselves in our community – listen to how Jesus is calling you yet again, yet all the more, not to “go back to normal” but to go out to continue the transformation of the world.

We don't yet know who or how we will be, but Christ feeds us for the journey.

Come, all are welcome. Amen.