

We Don't Live Under a Closed Heaven

Sermon for the 1st Sunday after Easter

Sermon Text: John 21:1-14



¹ After this Jesus revealed Himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and He revealed Himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. ³ 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. ⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered Him, "No." ⁶ He said to them, "Cast the net on 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 of the quantity of fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. ⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask Him "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after He was raised from the dead.

Eventually Easter was over. Jesus was certainly seen here and there by some of the disciples, but for most of the time, he was absent. And what were the disciples supposed to do now without Jesus? The only thing left was to take care of everyday life. To see that there's bread on the table and that life continues. All of this is reflected in Peter's words when he said: "Let's go fishing!" And the bad thing is that the disciples just went. Going fishing without Jesus! Yes, they had to now get used to a life without Jesus. Almost shocking how they just accept this lot as if the resurrection of Jesus hadn't happened at all. And that all becomes clear with their fishing because they don't even catch a single fish! They come

away completely empty! A disappointing Easter result for the disciples! Was that it? Although Jesus had spoken about a new life. He spoke about how we are a new creation and how we will live on a new earth where justice and peace would rule. And Jesus also demonstrated that with tangible miracles. Not the least of which, through His wonderful resurrection! And now! Now everything was still the same. Going about crude, everyday life, taking care of daily needs, until you just die in the end. Just like it already always was. In this story that we hear from the Bible today, we don't only see the disappointment of Jesus' disciples but also the disappointment of all people who want to see Jesus in their life. But Jesus doesn't leave us alone! He didn't leave the disciples alone! He doesn't leave us alone, rather He comes to us! It's interesting that in all the accounts about the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples don't recognize Him right away. The women do not recognize Jesus until He reveals Himself to them. And the disciples on the road to Emmaus spoke with Jesus for a long time, but it wasn't until Jesus broke the bread and gave thanks that their eyes were opened. That's how it is in our Bible reading for today. Jesus sends the disciples back once more to fish and just as the nets were full, they realize at once that it's Jesus. It's Jesus Himself who opens the eyes of the disciples. The disciples had no idea how to find Jesus. That's why they just went fishing. But Jesus knew the entire time where they were. And He's the one who sought them out and showed them that He is never far away. It's still the same to this day. It may be that we don't always see Jesus. And yet He's there. And He sees us! Sometimes, He reveals Himself to us. But then only when He does so Himself! What did Jesus do at that time when He revealed Himself to the disciples on the sea of Tiberias? Did He invite them to a meeting to work through items 1-10 of what they now had to do? No, Jesus grilled fish and simply ate with them. This is how Jesus always did it! He ate together with people to show them that He was one of them. That eating together was also a hint of the great banquet that we will one day celebrate with God in heaven. A reminder that God invites us to His great banquet in heaven and that we will be in close communion with Him. And Jesus took the fish and gave it to them. He did the same with the bread. The meal also reminds us of communion and shows us that we are closely connected with Jesus in the Lord's supper.

Dear congregation, Jesus obviously found it important to remind His disciples once more that He is there and in fellowship with them. The disciples had not yet received the Holy Spirit. That's why there was nothing left for them to do but to fish. And without Jesus, their nets remain empty! For us Christians, this story is very important because it shows us what can happen when we do something without Jesus. How quickly do we in the Church simply start out and forget that it's all about Jesus. The disciples who stand there with empty nets are a symbol of a church that tries to do things without Jesus. Mission without Jesus turns into propaganda or even worse, into colonialism where you just try to spread your own power and culture! And a church that spreads many interesting philosophical, theological, or even political thoughts without Jesus is a church without the Risen One that has lost its essence. Just as Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, if we Christians want to believe without the risen Lord, we are the poorest of all people! As soon as the focus is off of Jesus, our preaching becomes self-opinionated or reveals itself as unimportant speech! Jesus must always be the foundation, motivation, and purpose of our work. And Jesus places Himself in the middle of our hopeless situation and shows us who we are dealing with. But Jesus doesn't just show us who we are dealing with, He also shows us what we should do. Peter and the others could still remember exactly the last time Jesus had worked such a fish miracle. And at that time, He compared the catch of fish with their new task: They should be fishers of men! What Jesus does with this renewed fish miracle is nothing other than this: He wants His disciples to remember what their real task is. They shouldn't just return to their hopeless everyday life but rather go into all the world and talk about Jesus. The message of these few men on the Sea of Galilee shouldn't

just reach many, but rather the entire world. The 153 fish that Jesus' disciples were allowed to catch in their nets point not only to a great catch of fish but also the missionary task that awaits the disciples. One of the Church fathers, Hieronymus points out that at that time in the world, there were 153 known types of fish. And therefore, the number 153 would indicate that there will be many different people who would find a place in the Church. And regardless the net wouldn't rip. There is a place for everyone in God's kingdom! Indeed, when the Holy Spirit was poured out, some of these nations were listed. And to this day, the Gospel has been proclaimed in all the world and in all languages. Who would have thought this, back then when Jesus sat with His friends on the shore of the Sea of Galilee!

As Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples, He showed them that He was never far away and He still remembered that they were His followers. The disciples were tired from fishing and they were hungry. And last but not least, they were disappointed. And Jesus didn't leave His disciples alone. He had a meal with them during which everything that He said and did again became crystal clear. Dear congregation, it is always necessary that we return to the beginnings of our faith. It is important that we remember that Jesus is the founder of our faith. He is also the One who leads us to our goal. It may be that we will not always have full nets. It may be that we must put up with many disappointments. But it may also be that we are blessed with torn nets. However it may be, it is always the same Lord who is never far away. He sits at the right hand of God, rends the heavens wide and says: come, for the feast is ready! Amen.