

“Beginning—Again”
April 11, 2021

I Peter 1:13-16
John 21:1-14

With warmer weather and more daylight, spring can bring with it sense of hope. This seems especially the case this year as an ever-increasing number of people are getting vaccinated. In spite of the also-increasing number of Covid cases and variants, many people are starting to look forward to seeing friends and family, traveling, gathering together, and even simply going to the grocery store without that sense of dread so many of us have had over the past year.

As we look ahead, we also find an increasing number of articles about all of this. They are filled with suggestions and titles such as:

“Life is about to get busier again. Here’s how to keep your time — and mind — organized,”

or

“How to hang on to the good pandemic habits and get rid of the bad ones.” Anybody have any bad pandemic habits? Maybe it’s a good thing that no one will know if you raise your hand—except those who are with you. And they know those bad habits already. Does anybody have any good pandemic habits?

One article even holds out the hope that “You can be a different person after the pandemic,” although I also recently saw a New Yorker cartoon in which the illustrator worried that she had turned into a toad over the past year. This caused her a great deal of concern until she went out and discovered that so, too, had most other people.

“You can be a different person” indeed.

Life has changed.

And there are more changes ahead.

As a congregation will our life together simply get busier again—or will new occasions teach new duties—as the old hymn asserts?

Will we want to be the same congregation we were in 2019 and do the same things we did then?

Or will we discover that we are different people and want different challenges and opportunities?

We’re only beginning to sort all of this out.

It will take time and honesty and love.

We, of course, are not the first people to find themselves in new situations, trying to figure out what has happened, what it means, and how we might live in new ways in new days.

The Gospel of John tells of Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, and other disciples of Jesus sometime after Easter. After betrayal, arrest, desertion, and crucifixion—even after resurrection—there they are, on their own once more.

“I’m going fishing,” Peter says. That is to say, “I’m going back to what I know. I’m going back to what I did before Jesus came along and called me from my boat and my nets. I’m going back to the things that used to be; back to what I used to be.”

The others agree to go with him. They, too, are ready at last to get back to life as they knew it—to the boat and the sea, to the nets and the fish. Perhaps in returning to these familiar pursuits, to what they remembered, they could recover their lives and move ahead.

Like many of us, they just want to get back to normal.

In three words, John tells us the result: “They caught nothing.”

Resurrection is not about a return to what once was. Life has changed, the world has changed and it will not be the same.

Rather than inviting us on a journey to the past, resurrection calls us to look with honesty at our lives and our world as they now.

“Children,” the risen Christ calls out somewhat condescendingly to those in the boat, “Children, you have no fish, have you?”

Peter Gomes imagines the Jesus almost taunting them as he asks something like: “Children, you don’t have anything to show for what it is that you spend most of your time doing, and what it is you think you are good and best at, do you? Children, you don’t have anything to show for how you spend your time, do you? Children, you have no fish, do you?”

And they admit it with a simple “No.” Peter and the others took a trip back in time that produced nothing. They’ve come up empty.

Is it dawning on them yet that life has changed, that their world has changed, that they have changed?

The questioning Jesus now says: “Try the other side.”

As is often the case, the word Jesus speaks is not what we might want or expect. We might listen for words of inspiration as old ways prove insufficient for new situations. We might hope for a bit of “spiritual” advice. What we get are fishing instructions.

To those who are finding a return to “normal” insufficient for their needs, a voice calls: try the other side.

To those who are living into a new reality, still uncertain about just what that reality is and how to be fully alive in it—to all of us Jesus shouts so that we may hear: “Try the other side.”

At the very least, these followers seem open to trying something else—they act when Jesus tells them: “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some fish.” The experience of the disciples was a great catch of fish—something they could not achieve on their own, something that required looking once more in the midst of discouragement and confusion.

This is the “Yes” of the resurrection. Following the risen Christ, we look again. We reassess our situation so that we can see new possibilities and take new actions.

I Peter addresses early Christians in difficult circumstances. The author encourages them to set aside the thoughts and desires of their past—for life has changed—and to live according to their new calling in the resurrection.

Living into the future instead of the past will require some mental strength, some new ways of thinking. After the development of the atomic bomb Albert Einstein said: “Everything has changed, save for our thinking.”

Our life has changed.

Our church has changed.

Our world has changed.

All of this call for new thought. Like the early Christians, we, too, hear the summons of I Peter: “Prepare your minds for action!” A more accurate translation is “Gird the loins of your mind!”

The “Yes,” of the resurrection is given to those who will look again at their lives and their world and see the new, previously unconsidered and untried possibilities.

The “Yes” of the resurrection is given to those who will take on the mental, physical, and especially the spiritual work of trying the “other side of the boat”—building into the future rather than futilely trying to rebuild the past.

When we find the courage to “try the other side,” to take a different approach, all our failure, all our effort, is taken up into the energy of life and transformed.

The joyful and empowering “Yes” of resurrection comes to us today. It calls us to new life and gives us vision for the future.

Returning to the past is not an option—neither for our world and our nation nor for our individual lives and this congregation.

We are heading into a new part of our life’s journey in a new world.

Open to the new, open to resurrection, we give shape to God’s future.