

On the beach

John 21:1-19

April 22, 2007

Jesus appeared once more to his disciples at Lake Tiberias ...

This is the lake also known as Lake Galilee or the Sea of Galilee. I've been there, as have some of you. Thirty years ago, I spent a week in Israel, touring Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the Jordan River valley and the Galilee region. It was a most meaningful experience for me, an opportunity to put flesh and bones on the biblical stories I knew so well, or should I say, sand and stones? I had long known and believed the stories of Jesus, but being there in Israel, walking the streets of Old Jerusalem, touching the remnant wall of the ancient Temple, looking across Lake Galilee to its far shore, the stories came alive in a new way for me. They could never be mere fairy tales or moral fables or religious "stories," but only the remembered experiences of real people in a real place, their remembered encounters with the man named Jesus.

But of all the places I visited, Lake Galilee, Lake Tiberias, was the most meaningful. It was the real thing! The same body of water beside which Jesus walked and on which Jesus boated. The same body of water into which Peter jumped when he realized that the man on the shore was the Lord!

The "holy" sites, the elaborate shrines, the impressive churches did not stir my soul. They were for me too far removed from reality, too artificial, too commercial. Will you understand what I mean if I say, too religious? For me the most deeply spiritual experience of my visit to Israel was swimming in Lake Galilee, knowing that Peter has swum ashore in this very same lake, maybe in this very same spot!

I have always been a fresh air Christian! From the beginning my faith was nurtured in outdoor settings: a Pacific island off the coast of California, the rocky and thickly wooded shores of Lake Huron, climbing mountains or watching birds or canoeing with my Dad. My faith was never confined to indoor spaces, never confined to "church." But understand that I mean more than my faith was a "nature" faith. I do mean that I came to love the God who created such beauty and allowed us to enjoy such beauty, but more than that, that I heard Jesus' call to follow outside, outside the walls of any church, in all the places I was and wanted to be already. These are the places where faith in Jesus gets real and makes a real difference: at home, in school, at the workplace, in the woods, on the beach.

That's where Jesus met them that morning ... on the beach.

It was early morning, the sun was just rising. It is such a remarkable time of day, early morning ... quiet and still and fresh. I can imagine a mist hanging low over the waters of the lake, while gentle waves lap at the edges of the beach, sand squeaking or scrunching beneath each step, squeezing between the toes on each foot, still holding the coolness of the night. The low-angled light gives a soft edge and a subdued hue to everything in sight -- sand and rock and sticks and water and birds and people -- revealing them, it seems, as they really are, not as they will be once the sun is fully up and they have put on their daytime clothing against the brightness of the light. The smell of the charcoal fire and the grilling fish commingles with the smells borne on the damp onshore breeze and the smells of dune grasses and sea roses and cedar.

It is such a remarkable time of day. Everything seems new. Anything seems possible. Even when you've been up all night, the dawn marks the beginning of a new day, bringing with it a palpable sense of new possibility. And this new day did bring new possibilities, even new realities, to the seven men who had been fishing all night without success. They followed the advice of the man on the beach and their net was so filled with fish that they could not haul it in. But that was the least of the new realities this new day would bring!

Tell me ... What do you need most after a long night of fishing, catching nothing? Something to eat! Jesus met them on the beach and gave them a breakfast of bread and fish.

Think about it! Here is the risen Jesus, greeting seven of his dearest disciples -- Peter and Thomas and James and John and Nathanael and two others -- meeting them for the third and the last time recorded by this gospel writer, and what does he do for them? He cooks them breakfast! This is new life! Bread and fish and sitting around a charcoal fire with the Master!

I hope, I truly hope, that even this one small detail can put to rest any notion that the new life Jesus promises is purely "spiritual." Jesus doesn't come to save your soul. He comes to save you! He comes to bring you life, to bring you to life, to feed your body and your spirit with the goodness and bounty of God. To feed spirit and body. To feed body and spirit.

Tell me ... What do you need most after a long night of guilt and shame, when you cannot shake the bitterness of your betrayal of your dearest friend when he needed you most? Forgiveness? That's not what Jesus gave Peter. Not exactly. Jesus gave Peter something beyond forgiveness, may I say, something better than forgiveness. Jesus gave Peter back his dignity. Jesus gave Peter back himself.

Do you love me?

Three times Jesus asked Peter the question, once for each of the times Peter had denied even knowing him. He asks the question again and again, not so Peter can convince Jesus he really means it, but so Peter can be convinced that he really means it! *Yes, it is true! I do love you!*

Take care of my sheep.

This is more than forgiveness, more than a cancellation of past debts. This is a new charge, a new calling, the gift of renewed responsibility and a new opportunity to prove that love is genuine. *Peter, I have a job for you. Get off the self-pity, get to work, and follow me.*

And Peter did. He was given a second chance to follow Jesus all the way, as he had once vowed, even if it meant dying with him. And this time, he would. This time he would follow Jesus all the way, to death.

It is a sober and even sorrowful conclusion to the time on the beach, acknowledging the reality that this world still resists the light and fears the truth and refuses to embrace peace. But a moment like this on the beach with Jesus makes it all worth it! It is a glimpse, a first taste, of the peace we will enjoy with Jesus and with each other, in a world made new, in this world made new ... forever!