

Jesus appeared to his disciples and followers many different times and in many different settings after his resurrection. In John's gospel he appeared on four different occasions. The first time he appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden. She thought his body had been stolen and that all hope was lost, but then Jesus showed himself to her and changed everything. Later that same evening the rest of the disciples, except for Thomas, were gathered in a house behind locked doors. They were afraid, and rightfully so, their friend and Savior had been crucified and they had to be thinking they were next. Despite the locked door Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." He then showed them his hands and side where he had been wounded. The disciples rejoiced because they knew then that he was indeed alive and well.

His parting words to his disciples on that occasion were: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." How interesting that Jesus would leave them with words about forgiveness. That proves once again the power and importance of forgiving and learning how to forgive.

Earnest Hemingway once related an anecdote through which he wanted to show the extreme popularity of the Spanish name "Paco". One day, Hemingway claimed, an ad appeared in the classifieds of a Spanish newspaper: "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon Wednesday. All is forgiven. Love, Papa." That Wednesday the authorities had to muster a whole squad of police to contain the crowd of eight hundred Pacos who had shown up at the Hotel Montana! That not only showed the popularity of the name Paco, but also the great human need for forgiveness.

All of the disciples were there in the house except for Thomas. Thomas came back and when the others told him what they had seen, he said, "Unless I see the mark of the nail in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nail in his hands and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Well, Thomas was about to have his opportunity to believe. Jesus came back and showed him exactly what he wanted to see and Thomas believed.

That brings us up to our resurrection appearance for today. This time Jesus showed himself to his disciples by the Sea of Galilee. Peter was there with Thomas, Nathaneal, James, John, and two others who are not named. Peter said to the rest of the group, "I'm going fishing." When I first read

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this I thought to myself, “Going fishing?” Jesus has been resurrected and showed himself to you Peter and you want to go fishing? It’s important for us to remember that Peter’s livelihood before becoming one of Jesus’ disciples was fishing. It was his work. So Peter was not saying, “I’m going to take a couple of days off and go on a vacation.” Instead, he was saying to his friends, “I’m going back to work.” He didn’t know what else to do except to get back to life. Apparently, the others thought it was a good idea as well. They all got into the boat that night and went fishing.

If they had been entered in a fishing tournament they would have come in last place! They caught nothing. Zero. Zilch. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said in effect: “Catch anything?” To which the disciples replied, “No.” Then Jesus decided it would be a good idea to become a fishing guide. So he said, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” It was his way of saying, “You have been throwing a plastic worm all night with no luck, so why don’t you tie on a spinner bait?” Jesus sure had a curious way of showing up and making himself known! The disciples, still not aware that it was Jesus giving this fishing advice, cast their net to the right side of the boat and they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. John recorded that there were 153 fish caught. They went from nothing to everything, but isn’t that how it is when we include Jesus in our lives? We have nothing without him and everything with him.

I think there is a lesson in that for you and me. When our nets are on the “wrong” side of the boat, our lives are meaningless. When we are the ones who are calling the shots and think that we know what to do, we ultimately come up empty. There are plenty of opportunities in this world to end up on the “wrong” side of the boat.

There is the wrong side of **materialism**. Some of us go through life thinking that the name of the game is to accumulate as much as possible, but at the end of the day when the net is pulled up out of the water, it is empty. Some of us are on the wrong side of **relationships**. We selfishly demand too much of our spouses or children or friends, and end up with an empty net. Some of us are on the wrong side of **addictions**. We have become addicted to things that take us further away from God instead of drawing us closer, and our nets are empty. Then there is the wrong side of **idolatry**. We put other things and people in the place of God and the net is empty. There are a lot of people in this world, you and me included, who go through

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life with empty nets. I'm glad we are all here together because this is the place to trade in your empty net for a full one.

Last night we had a fish fry. This fish fry was originally intended to be a fund raiser of some kind, but a funny thing happened along the way. I was thinking about the fish fry and was talking to someone about it and said, "Wouldn't it be neat if we could say to everyone, 'Come over to the church and eat fish with us. It's free!'" This friend of mine then said, "Why not?" We began to talk about it and ten minutes later I decided to have a free fish fry for the church and community. At that point I was on the hook (pardon the pun) for coming up with the funds to put together a large fish fry.

I decided to do this for two reasons – number one – to see what your reaction would be to such a thing. I wanted to see what you were made of. Would you sit back with your arms folded and say, "He's crazy! We don't need to be doing a fish fry for nothing! What is this going to cost us?" Or would you say, "That's a great idea. Let's do something for others just for the sake of doing it. Let's be an example of God's grace." By the way, you responded beautifully. I cannot tell you how proud I am to be the pastor of a church where people come together the way you did for no other reason than love for others. The second reason for this fish fry was to give us and others a concrete example of what God's unconditional love is all about. Last night was more than just a fish fry and "get together". It was the embodiment of unconditional love and grace.

I was frying fish behind the serving line for most of the evening and I noticed the looks on people's faces as they walked through the line. Many of the people either didn't know that it was a free fish fry or forgot, and when they got to the serving line they instinctively reached for their wallets to pay for the meal. Then one of the servers would say, "Oh it's free. Don't worry about it?" "It's free? We have to have to pay you something" they would reply. "Yes, it's free. Thanks for coming!" I don't know who enjoyed it more – the servers who got to tell someone that the meal was free or the people receiving the free meal. The ones who received the free meal had the same look on their faces. It was a look that said, "Did I just receive something for nothing? Did these people spend their Saturday afternoon and evening doing all this for me?"

Now I know that fried catfish and beans and coleslaw do not come close to comparing to God's grace and love, but you would have had a hard

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time convincing me of that last night. So many times we are guilty of measuring the success of events by how much money is raised and by how many people show up. Let me tell you something. I have been involved in some pretty good events at churches where we raised a lot of money for good causes and packed the place, but last night, without a doubt, was the most joyful church event I've ever been around and I think it's because the whole thing was wrapped in grace from beginning to end.

Grace is such a foreign concept to our culture. Many of us have been brought up to believe that we work for everything we have and there is some truth to that. There is nothing wrong with good, honest work, but at the same time our salvation and worth is not tied directly to the amount of work we do. God's grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ comes to us freely and with no strings attached.

The disciples were obviously impressed with their catch of fish, but let's keep in mind they had nothing at all to do with it. Jesus told them where to fish and through that act of grace they were successful. They were so impressed with their catch, that one of the disciples, the one referred to as the one "Jesus loved", recognized Jesus. He said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" This is where things get crazy. We are told that Peter was naked and when he saw that it was Jesus on the shore, he put on his clothes and jumped in the water. They were about 100 yards from the shore. Peter was not literally "naked". By "naked" John meant to say that he was wearing only a loincloth – a common way for fishermen to dress in those days. Why Peter put his clothes on to jump in the lake we don't know. All we know for sure was that he was so excited that he couldn't think straight. He had to get to Jesus as fast as he could.

When Peter and the rest of the disciples reached the shore, they had another surprise. It was not enough for Jesus to play fishing guide, now he is operating a bed and breakfast! He said, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught. Come and have breakfast!" What a powerful image! The disciples brought the fish that Jesus provided and Jesus blessed that fish and served it to them for breakfast. If you think it was just a breakfast, you've got another thing coming. It was sweet communion in the form of bread and 153 reminders of who the real Provider was.

Isn't that what God does with us at this communion rail? We think we are offering him something on our own and doing him a favor for

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showing up, but in reality all we have to offer, including ourselves, belongs to him in the first place and was given to us by him. Have you ever thought about communion in that way? Have you ever thought that when we take our hurts and pains and joys and questions to the altar for communion that it may be God's way of saying, "Come and rest here. Come and find peace here. Come and find fellowship here. Come and find salvation here." Or as Jesus put it that morning on the shoreline: "How do you like your eggs?"