

Scripture passage, John 21:1-19
Delivered April 18, 2010
While the credits role

Do you know that new movie with Steve Carell and Tina Fey? It's called Date Night- The two play a New Jersey couple who fear that the demands of raising kids and juggling hectic careers has wrung the romance from their marriage. They try to recapture that romantic spark on a big city Manhattan date-night that spins wildly out of control.

At a trendy restaurant they are mistaken for extortionists by a mobster. The rest of the movie, as I understand it, is basically a cat and mouse game, but Steve and Tina are able to survive their many ordeals, and we are supposed to have lots of laughs watching them do so.

Steve Carell was talking to someone on TV about making that movie. He and comedian Fey were given a lot of latitude as to what went into the film, so they decided that at the end of the movie, they would grab and kiss each other, and that they would sustain that smooch as long as the credits rolled. Carell speculates that that kiss just may turn out to be the longest in the history of moviedom.

I was reminded of that kiss while the credits roll on my first read-through of this week's text. Just so you know, it is good practice when you are studying scripture to look a little ahead of the passage you are studying, to get the gist of what's going on; likewise, it's good practice to look a little bit below the passage you are studying— to find out how what goes after is connected to what you are reading.

If you look just a chapter ahead of our scripture passage for today—in chapter 20, you have a fine ending to John's gospel: The disciples are together in an upper room when Jesus appears to them. Jesus breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is John's version of the tongues of fire which will land on the disciples at Pentecost.

And then at the very end of chapter 20 we read: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name."

With that you would expect John's story to come to an end. He has finished with his gospel. It's time to move on to a new book, the book of Acts, and learn more about the beginnings of the early church. Roll the credits, please.

But no. The credits may be rolling but our gospel writer sets one more scene for us—not a romantic scene with two people in a super long embrace, but a night scene of boats and fisherman in the Sea of Tiberius in Galilee. "**How** did the disciples get **there**?" we

ask. The credits are rolling and yet we are presented with a whole other seemingly disconnected story. Some scholars speculate that this tacked-on scene at the end of the book of John was added by John at a later date. And I think that is probably right. Maybe John went back to his gospel, years later, and thought, “Oh, Christians need to hear about Jesus’ other appearance, too.” Just because it may be tacked on to the end, though, doesn’t make it any less important than the gospel proper. So, it is **very** worth our while to take a look at it, and to try to understand it.

As I said, in the lines of scripture that come immediately before our passage for today, Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room and they receive the Holy Spirit. After that, you would expect them to go off immediately to spread the word about Jesus’ resurrection, and his message about God’s love and forgiveness. But no, in today’s tacked-on passage we read that some of the disciples, including Peter, have returned to life as it once was—the life that they remember—their lives as fishermen.

And that’s probably just about right. At this point in our lives all of us have experienced **something** that is life-altering—the death of a loved one, for instance. When that happens, your days run together as you host family members from another town, city or state, take care of funeral arrangements, pick up people from the airport. You forget to eat and you can’t sleep for all the commotion in your life. Then, finally, the last family member leaves. You don’t walk, you **run** to pick up your old life where you left off—you return to work, or to the activities you were involved in before the death occurred. You resume your social calendar—the book club, your dinners with friends. But here’s the sticking point. You can’t really go back to the way things used to be. You’ve got this permanent hole in your heart. Your life will never be the same.

Conversion is another life-altering experience, and the disciples had certainly been converted. When they had been converted is open to debate—was it when they first received their call? Or did their conversion happen gradually sometime after that, as they grew to love Jesus. Maybe their conversion didn’t occur until Jesus breathed on them in that upper room. James Baldwin, a black novelist of the latter half of the 20th century, tells of his own sudden conversion through the experience of the protagonist, John Grimes in the beloved classic, Go Tell it on the Mountain. As John Grimes stands at the altar during an altar call, Baldwin says, “John saw the Lord—for a moment only; and the darkness, for a moment only, was filled with a light he could not bear. Then, in a moment, he was set free; his tears sprang as from a fountain; his heart, like a fountain of waters, burst. Then he cried, “Oh, blessed Jesus! Oh, Lord Jesus! Take me through!

“And a sweetness filled John....as he heard the sound of singing; the singing was for him. For his drifting soul was anchored in the love of God; in the rock that endured

forever. The light and the darkness had kissed each other, and were married now, forever, in the life and the vision of John's soul."

You'd think that you'd want to keep that kind of conversion fresh; It's a plus not a negative in your life—but even with conversion, there comes a time when you may want your old life back. Again, as in the death of a loved one, though, you can't GO back. You can't dodge the Holy Spirit. You can't turn back the wind of Pentecost.

Wistfully noting the change that has occurred in her own life, a clergy friend asked me not too long ago, "Gay Lee— have you ever tried to watch a movie or read a book and NOT think about the theological implications— Well, I have, and I can't do it. Isn't that pathetic?"

That's what's happening in our story for today. The disciples, poor mortals that they are, want to go back to their lives BC—that is, Before Christ.

But they can't erase the three years they spent following Jesus anymore than they can be UNconverted. Those disciples would have found that out on their own sooner or later. Jesus just speeded up the process by appearing on that beach. When Peter jumps into that water, he's not thinking, "Oh no. I've had enough of Jesus." His heart tells him that the joy he experienced with Jesus far outweighs any modest happiness he experienced in his life as a fisherman. The rest of the disciples realize that too. This meeting on the beach, then, is a defining moment for them. And it's a defining moment for us, too. We can relate. We can't return to our lives BC and we can't be UNconverted either, nor would we want to be.

Now there's one more thing I want to talk about in our passage for today. It's the fish the disciples caught. Why 153? What does that number represent? One idea is that the number 153 adds realism to the story—it's not "about a hundred, or somewhere in the neighborhood of 200." It's 153—that's a definite amount, as if someone took the time to count those fish—and then remembered that number, passed it on to John, who wrote it down.

The most compelling reason for the number 153, though, is suggested by the Church Father Hieronymus who lived in the 300's AD and translated the Greek Bible into Latin. As you might guess, Hieronymus had total command of the ancient Greek language. He knew something about ancient Greek ways, too. He suggests that in Jesus' day people believed that there were only 153 varieties of fish in the entire world. Presumably, then, Jesus wanted his disciples to make the connection. You are to fish for people—you are to fish for people of all stripes throughout the world so that all people everywhere will come to believe.

As I said, that is a compelling reason for the number 153. However at the very least, 153 offers us an image of plenty. It's what we receive when we accept Jesus as our Lord. It's something too good to pass up. It's hope for a fallen world. It's a sense of love in community, too—that whatever it is we have reason to be sad or mad about, we can share that with each other and together we can work toward a better way. That is living a life of plenty.

Now at the beginning of this sermon I suggested that it is always good to look a little above the scripture you are studying, to see what goes before, and a little below the scripture passage you are studying to see what goes after. If we jump a little below our reading for today we learn that on that beach, Jesus tells Peter that he will come to a violent end. Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." A life of plenty, then, is something other than long life or even prosperity. The life of plenty that Jesus talks about is what is available to each of us, through faith. Believe it. It's true. Let all the people say, Amen