

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” That’s what Jesus said when He called His first disciples. Simon and his brother Andrew, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, heard these words and, in faith given by the Holy Spirit, left their nets and boats and followed. For the next few years, they and others whom Jesus called would learn much. They would hear of the Kingdom of God. They would see the power of God at work in great miracles.

And then, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, they would witness the salvation and victory of God. This event would bring a great change in the disciples, a change that John himself was inspired to record for us in his gospel. As we see the change that Easter worked in the disciples, we can see how Easter changes our lives as well.

This text shows an incredible change, especially when you compare it with the other miraculous catch of fish recorded in the gospels. That one – from Luke 5 – takes place very early on in Jesus’ earthly ministry, and so the Holy Spirit has given us here a wonderful before-and-after picture. In the first event, Jesus comes across the disciples as they are ashore, washing their nets after a long and unsuccessful night of work. Jesus preaches from Peter’s boat, and then He tells Peter to let down the nets in the deep for a catch.

Do you recall Peter’s response? “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” Peter gives Jesus some pushback, a little “You stick to preaching and leave the fishing to the fishermen,” but then does relent and lets down the nets.

Compare that to today’s reading. Once again, the disciples have been out all night fishing, and once again they’ve caught nothing. They’re still in the boats, about a hundred yards from shore, when Jesus hails them. They don’t immediately recognize Jesus – similar to what we heard about last week. In the boat they hear, “Children, do you have any fish?”

It’s an interesting question for a couple reasons. First, He calls them “children,” or perhaps something like “lads” or “boys,” a familiar, friendly greeting. And second, the question implies that He knows they don’t have any fish. A more literal translation would be along the lines of “You don’t have any fish, do you?” Whoever this guy hollering from the shore is, He seems pretty comfortable with them. Maybe the disciples glance at each other, wondering if anyone knows this guy, as they call back, “No.”

Then the man does something even more strange: He calls out, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” If this is just some random stranger, it probably would’ve provoked quite a response. They’ve been working all night, and then some overly-friendly beachcomber jokes that the night’s been a bust for them before offering some stupid, armchair-quarterback type advice. “The right side of the boat? Oh, why didn’t we think of that?” Can’t He go bother some other fishing crew?

But the crazy thing is, the disciples do it! They take the advice of this stranger and cast the nets – no pushback, no questions, no eye-rolling. Why do they do this? It has to be faith, seeing something in this guy with their hearts that their eyes can't see. The Holy Spirit has led the disciples to Galilee, to where Jesus said He'd meet them. So no doubt they're looking for Him, having faith in His promise to them.

And now, perhaps the Spirit has them thinking, "Maybe this is Him?" Perhaps the Spirit has them recall the last time Jesus told them to let down the nets, and they're thinking, "We should just do it and see what happens." And so, over the right side the nets go. Faith leads them to trust, even when they aren't completely sure.

And what happens? Well, recall again what had happened the time before. At the first catch, there were so many fish that the nets began to tear, and then Peter and Andrew's boat begins to sink. James and John come alongside, and the massive catch starts to sink their boat, too. Jesus has given a powerful yet wordless rebuke to Peter's objections, and then also provides further reason for him to follow Him, seeing as how their fishing operation would need a fair amount of repair work to get it going again.

You may remember the response that this catch brings forth from Peter. He falls down before Jesus and says, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The power of God has that effect in sinful men.

Compare that to what happens after this post-Easter catch. Again, the Lord's word is proven true. John – who, remember, was one of the guys in the boat – writes, "Now they were not able to haul it in, because the quantity of fish." Once more, Jesus provides so abundantly that the disciples literally can't handle it. Yet a notable difference occurs: no boats almost sink, no nets begin to tear – in fact, John specifically notes, "And although there were so many, the net was not torn." Jesus doesn't have to physically hinder their fishing operation, because He knows that their hearts have faith that will follow Him regardless.

That attitude of the heart is seen in Peter especially. John, his faith bursting forth at the sign of the great catch, says, "It is the Lord!" to Peter. What does Peter do? Jumps overboard to get to his beloved Lord! Gone is the fear which asked Jesus to depart from his sin. Instead there's just joy and enthusiasm and love. He can't wait for the boat to be rowed to shore. And all the fish? The other six will have to figure that out. Peter has to be with Jesus! This is the heart that Jesus has transformed through His death and resurrection. Peter weeping bitterly after denying his Lord has been replaced by Peter frantically, joyously swimming to be at his Lord's side. And the other disciples, instead of fearfully whispering to one another, "Who is this?", confidently know that it is the Lord.

Perhaps one more thing should be noted about this miraculous catch: the description of the catch. With the previous one, all we know is that there were a lot of fish – enough to tear nets and sink boats. But what kind? How many? The Scripture doesn't say, and it doesn't say because that information isn't important for that particular event. But in this event, we are told that they are large fish, good fish, and that there are 153 of them.

What do we make of the number 153? There have been many theories throughout the history of the Church, and none seem conclusive. I think that the main point God is making in His word is that each fish is counted, numbered, known. Why is that important? Well, after this catch, the Bible doesn't say if the disciples ever went fishing again. But it does describe quite a bit of how they carried out Jesus' command to be fishers of men. As they follow where He leads, He will work through them to bring people into His Church.

The Lord is showing that He knows each and every one of His own, just as each and every fish was numbered, and He will make sure that they are brought in through the net of the Word that the disciples will be casting. Through this, and through the great victory of Easter, the disciples would be given great confidence as they went out to make more disciples of all nations.

These changes, worked in the disciples through Christ's resurrection, are at work in us as His disciples today. Through Easter, our faith is strengthened in the face of great challenges. Living as a Christian can be difficult in the face of an unbelieving world, and it only grows more difficult as the days go by. We might be tempted to respond as Peter initially did, to tell Jesus to stick to the "religious stuff" on Sunday mornings and leave the rest of our lives to us. We're the experts about living in our day and age, not some book written two thousand years ago.

But if God can and did raise Jesus from the dead, overcoming the foe that no amount of human effort can or ever will overcome, then He is most certainly capable of guiding us in our day and age. We can trust in Christ's word, knowing that, like His fishing advice, it cannot and will not fail.

Also like the disciples, especially Peter, the Resurrection takes away our fear and reassures us that God loves us and wants to be with us. The devil loves to try to confront us with the guilt of our sins and lead us to fear. But Easter shows us that those sins are washed away. The fact that God raised Jesus from the dead proved that the sacrifice of the cross had been sufficient, that the wall of separation between God and man had been broken down. The grave had not permanently separated Jesus from the disciples then, and it will not separate Him from His disciples today.

Also, that Jesus was raised as a man shows how He still desires to be with us and us with Him. He loves humanity so much that He retains it after He rises. His body was perfected and glorified, and He promises us in His word that our bodies will be like His. Easter shows us that we have a God who loves us more than we can imagine and who wants us to live with Him in perfection forever.

Finally, then, the risen Christ gives us confidence as we go out into the world. Each of you as Christians are Christians because the Lord worked through another Christian – a fellow fisher of men – to catch you in His nets and bring you into His Church. You are each numbered, known perfectly to the God who has brought you in. If the devil would ever lead you to think that God made a mistake or that you don't really belong among God's people, remember that none of those 153 fish were in the net by accident. Each one was placed there by the will of God. The same is true for you.

It's also true for those whom God would use you to catch, for every Christian is called to be a fisher of men. He places you in different settings, different fishing spots, so to speak. But He has given you His perfect word to cast and bring in others. Don't try to add to it or take away from it. He

is the one who brought the fish into the disciples' net, and He is the one who brings new fish in through Christians still today. God knows His own, so trust in Him and cast the net where He gives you the opportunity. He will fill it.

For centuries, our Lord and Savior has watched over His boat and the fishers of men aboard it. Through His love and mercy He brought you into it, and by His power He will keep you safe inside it. You have been given His forgiveness, His life, His salvation, His word. You have been remade by the miracle of His resurrection, and living in that new life, you can confidently share the Good News of the resurrection with everyone.

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