

The Epilogue: Coming Full Circle – April 10, 2016

John 21:1-19

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According to the Cambridge online dictionary, an epilogue is “a speech or piece of text added to the end of a play or book, often giving a short statement about what happens to the characters after the play or book finishes.” <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/epilogue>

An epilogue might have the function of tying up any loose ends that remain, following the conclusion of the story, or it might provide information about the future of a work’s characters, satisfying the curiosity of its readers, or it may even offer clues to what happens beyond the story, perhaps hinting at a sequel. The epilogue to John’s gospel fulfills all these expectations.

The previous chapter of John’s gospel gives us the story of Jesus appearing to his disciples in Jerusalem following his resurrection and sending them out to continue his work in the world. He comes back a second time, giving Thomas the opportunity to see Jesus “in the flesh” and let go of his doubt. The text then ends with a statement of the book’s purpose – that it was written so that the reader would come to believe in Jesus Christ and have life in his name. An appropriate ending, to be sure.

Yet we turn the page and find the epilogue. Some time has passed. Seven of Jesus’ disciples are gathered by the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee, apparently having returned to their homes and their livelihood. Peter announced to the others his intent to do a little nighttime fishing, and they decided to join him. They fished all night in the darkness, but had no luck.

At first light a figure called to them from the beach. They didn’t realize it was Jesus who called to them, but he knew they hadn’t caught anything. He urged them to toss their net to the right side of the boat, which they did, and they were rewarded with an abundant catch. The Beloved Disciple announced, “It is the Lord,” and Peter, true to his impetuous nature, jumped into his clothes, dove in the lake, and swam to shore, while the others came in the boat, dragging their haul of fish behind them.

Jesus had been on the beach for a while, having prepared a charcoal fire upon which he was cooking some fish. He also had bread. He invited the disciples to come and join him, and asked them to bring some of the fish they had just caught. Peter again took action and by himself, dragged the overly full net from the boat and in to shore. By this time all seven of the disciples knew it was Jesus, but none of them spoke up. Perhaps they were waiting for him to do or say something profound. But Jesus simply invited them to come and eat breakfast. After a night of work, they would surely be hungry. And as they gathered together, Jesus took the bread and gave it to them, and then he did the same with the fish. If those words have a familiar ring to them, like the words we hear when we celebrate communion together, that’s not a coincidence. It is a reminder of the strength and nurture we as the church receive from Christ when we gather to share table fellowship together.

The text doesn’t record any special teaching or any unique words of wisdom in this part of the story. Jesus simply shared a meal with them. He provided the food and showed them hospitality. In the

midst of the mundane, Jesus showed up. This was no mountain top experience; it was just a meal among friends. They probably laughed and shared stories, relaxing in the company of their Lord.

But I wonder what was going through Peter's mind. Had he been the first to act this morning because he felt he had something to prove? No doubt he had relived over and over in his mind the events of what happened around another charcoal fire, one outside of the High Priest's house. When in the darkness of night, he had three times denied knowing Jesus, and at the morning light, when the rooster crowed, his eyes locked with his Lord's and he immediately knew his shame.

Did he long to blurt out his disgrace to his Lord? To relieve himself of the guilt that surely weighed upon him? Would he ever be free of it?

And of course, Jesus knew what troubled Peter. After the breakfast had been eaten, Jesus turned to Peter. And Jesus addressed him formally, using his birth name, Simon, rather than the name that he had given to him. "Simon, son of John." As soon as Jesus uttered that name, Peter knew it was serious. It's sort of like when a child gets caught doing something wrong and the parent calls out the first name and middle name. When that happened, you just knew you were in trouble.

But there's more at stake. Jesus had given him the named Peter, or actually Petra, which means "rock." Peter was to be the rock upon which Jesus built his church. And now by reverting to using his given name "Simon," Jesus is not making any assumptions but is asking him, do you accept and will you live up to this responsibility? Will you lead my church; will you shepherd my people?

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Three times Jesus asked Peter this. Three times Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And three times Jesus instructed him, "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep." If you love me, do the work I have called you to do, knowing that it will not be an easy task, that it entails risk.

It is hard to face up to the shame of one's failure, especially failure at this level. With each question, "Do you love me?" Peter was reminded of his denial of Jesus, painfully reminded. But after the third time, he knew he was forgiven. As hard as it is to face admonishment, it would have been worse if Jesus had never confronted Peter. By confronting him, Peter knew he was loved enough, valued enough to be called to task by his Lord, to be forced to face where he had messed up, by the one whom he had denied. Peter was given the chance to both acknowledge his guilt and to receive the forgiveness that was offered to him. Cleansed of his failure, Peter was now reconciled and equipped to move forward to begin his task of building Christ's church. And Jesus ends the discourse to Peter, and to all of us, with the command to "Follow me."

And so the epilogue fulfills its task. It ties up the loose end of the relationship between Jesus and Peter. It shows where the disciples ended up. And it hints at the future of the church. The estrangement between Peter and Jesus has been remedied. Jesus is shown to be the source of abundance in the disciples' catch of fish. And we also learn that Jesus comes to us in the midst of the ordinary. The story of Jesus Christ did not come to an end with the events that took place in the first century. Jesus calls to us to come out of the metaphoric darkness and into the light of his abundance. He feeds us, the church, in the simple meal, assuaging our hunger and strengthening us

to do his work. He knows us better than we know ourselves and offers forgiveness for our betrayal and our denials. He commissions us to go out into the world to love those whom he loves. And he sends us to do his work of feeding and tending those who are least and lost.