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Encounters: The Wistful John 21:1-14

John 20 has to rank among the most spectacular pages ever written, don't you think? Jesus, the miracle-working rabbi from Nazareth, has been crucified like a common criminal, wrapped in burial cloths and spices and placed in a borrowed tomb behind a huge rolling rock and left for dead. But on Sunday when tearful Mary comes to mourn Him, the tomb is empty. And for the rest of chapter 20, the living Jesus encounters his fearful and doubtful disciples. He shows them his wounds. He breathes his Holy Spirit into them. He gives them the authority to go into the world and offer his salvation. And to wrap it all up, Jesus graciously appears to loyal, doubting, disappointed Thomas... who is so overcome with emotion that he blurts out the greatest declaration of faith in Jesus you will ever find: "My Lord and my God!" Can you imagine a Jew saying that to a man?

After reading chapter 20 we can hardly wait to turn to the last chapter of the gospel and see what these newly inspired, re-commissioned disciples are going to do. We might be disappointed. 20:1-14.

In chapter 20, Jesus meets with the disciples who are hiding in Jerusalem. But turn to the next chapter and suddenly, they are beside the Sea of Galilee (that's the other name of the Sea of Tiberias.) Galilee is 100 miles north of Jerusalem so obviously, time had passed since they last saw Jesus. Seven of the disciples are walking along the lakeside and suddenly Peter says, "I'm going fishing." The other six respond to their leader, "We'll go with you." So they climb into a boat, push out to sea and get to work.

So here's my puzzle for you: What are they doing fishing? When Jesus first called these men to be his disciples, he found many of them in fishing boats. And he called them away from their boats and nets so that they might be—do you remember?—fishers of men. Now, following his resurrection, Jesus appears again, gives his Holy Spirit, renews His commission to them to go into the world and preach. Wouldn't you expect to turn the page and read, "And so, empowered by the Holy Spirit and encouraged by Jesus' call upon their lives, the disciples set out, two by two, and began to proclaim the gospel of the risen Christ throughout the world..." or something like that?

But no, they take a fishing trip. "I'm going fishing," Peter says. "We'll go with you," the other six reply. The majority of the disciples who were present in that

upper room in Jerusalem, we now find bobbing around like a cork on the Sea of Galilee. What do you make of that? Does it seem disobedient? Irresponsible? Negligent? Some Bible commentators are outraged by their behavior. One of them calls their decision to go fishing, "Apostasy!" ...which means a renunciation of your faith. Wow, that's harsh. Is it fair to say that, because they went fishing for fish instead of fishing for men, that they had renounced their faith in Jesus? Still it doesn't make much sense, does it? The risen Christ has just told them to go preach the gospel and given them His Holy Spirit. They aren't going to get much preaching done floating around together in that boat, are they? What is going on here?

Here's what I think is going on: I think these seven men are wistful. Do you know what that word means? Wistful is defined as "full or yearning or a desire tinged with melancholy." Here's another definition: "...the sad appearance of someone looking back and thinking 'if only'... a pensive mood centered on something good in the past that is missed..." Sad regrets.

For spring break, Cooper and I took a guy-trip to California. We checked out colleges, played golf and visited my old stomping grounds in Bakersfield. Cooper had never been to Bakersfield where I served for nine years, and he wanted to see my old church and meet my friends. It was a wonderful time with my son, but it was also wistful for me. I found out that some of the folks I worked with when I was at First Presbyterian have left the church... some to go elsewhere, some to go nowhere. I remembered the joy that we shared together 30 years ago... the memories we made and the ministry we did together. And it made me sad to think they weren't part of First Pres anymore. It made me wonder, "What happened? What could have been done differently? If only..." Do any of you ever look back and say, "That didn't turn out the way I expected." Wistful.

You might ask, "How could the disciples possibly be sad? They have seen the resurrected Jesus! How could they be anything but thrilled?" That is true, Jesus was alive, but things were very different than they expected. After Jesus called them to be his disciples, they watched him perform miracles—turning water into wine, healing the paralyzed man and the blind man, raising Lazarus from the dead and so on. They listened to his teaching; they became more and more convinced that Christ really was the long-awaited Savior of Israel... the one who would march into Jerusalem, kick out the Romans and set up God's kingdom on earth. And they would be his right hand men! That was their vision! That was their dream for the future.

The cross shattered that dream. As far as we know, John was the only one who actually watched Jesus die on the cross. Maybe other disciples watched in hiding from a distance. But all of them got the news. Jesus, their Messiah, was dead. And they went into hiding, because if the Jewish authorities could kill Jesus, they could certainly stamp out his co-conspirators. And even after the amazing discovery that Jesus had been raised from death to life, it was still obvious that their future

would be very different from what they had expected. They once had a clear vision of their future. That vision was dead. Yes, they believed in Jesus. Yes, they were glad that he was alive. But the dream of what might have been was dead, dead, dead. They were wistful.

Not only that, their relationship with Jesus was now very different. For three years they had lived, traveled, eaten, slept, ministered together... a tight band of 12. Suddenly, Jesus wasn't around anymore. Suddenly, they were on their own. They missed the old ways. They missed waking up and having breakfast with Jesus and walking for miles together and listening as he taught the masses and then later explained things to them in private. Yes, Jesus was alive, but things would never be the same. They looked back and thought, "If only it could be like it used to be." Wistful.

I think this story reveals to us a group of disciples who are trapped between an old, dead vision and a new vision that is not at all clear to them. How in the world do they go from hiding for their lives in a room in Jerusalem to proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus? The answer? They don't know. They are confused and uncertain... sad about what they have lost, and confused about what to do next. And so... they fish.

While I was in Bakersfield, I connected with one of the guys who grew up in my high school program. He came to Christ in our ministry, and for 35 years he has walked with the Lord, served on the mission field, as an elder remained faithful to the church, and raised a godly family. This "boy" is now approaching 50, and this past year has been tough on him. Like so many, he got downsized from a job that he did well and enjoyed. Like a man of faith, he received the news hopefully, expecting that God must have something new and better in store for him. When people asked how he was doing, for the first few months, he responded enthusiastically, "I'm doing great; I can't wait to see what God is going to do."

But months passed, and it became harder and harder to remain optimistic. Finally, he took a job selling safety equipment in the oil fields. Nothing shameful about that, but not exactly that new, exciting ministry opportunity he was praying for and expecting. And right now, my friend would tell you that he is in a dark place. Here is a guy who wants to live his life for Christ and is willing to do, go or say whatever the Lord requires of him. But his life hasn't turned out as he expected. His dreams have been crushed, and he is discouraged.

Sound familiar to anyone here this morning? Of course it does! How many times have you had a mountaintop experience with the Lord—you are all fired up and ready to go—and then you come back down to the valley and find your spiritual high being overwhelmed by the day to day realities of life. A friend of mine described this morning's story as the difference between Sunday and Monday for him. Chapter 20 is Sunday. You go to church with your friends, meet Jesus, get inspired, ready to march out and take the world. Then comes Monday—chapter

21—and you find yourself struggling to remember why you felt so inspired the day before. And how you are going to translate that Sunday morning experience into a Monday morning reality.

I think that's what the disciples were going through that day. And I'm sympathetic to them; I've been there many times in my own life. You have a profound experience with Jesus, you have a clear vision of where you are supposed to go and what you are supposed to do, and then for some reason the props get knocked out from underneath you and you are left dazed, confused and a little worn down.

So what do you do in that situation? Well I think this story has several important principles to teach us when we face these wistful moments. First, climb out of your cave. It is very easy when you become disillusioned with God or with life to go into hiding... especially if you are a man. Life, career, marriage, kids, they just aren't on the trajectory that you imagined, and so you hide. Isn't that what the disciples were doing that first week? Each time we discover them, they are locked away—out of sight. out of the light—moping or hiding or mulling or stewing. All of those things can be fine for a season, but there reaches a point where you need to climb out of the cave... need to re-engage life. I have friends who come to mind, who I know are struggling with where their lives have taken them, and their instinct is to hide... to avoid. It is exactly the wrong instinct. You gotta climb out of your cave.

Second, find Christian friends. It is interesting to me that seven of the disciples were still hanging around together 85 miles north of Jerusalem. They were all confused and unclear, but they were determined to remain together, even in their confusion. Climbing out of your cave is an important first step, but it's not enough. You can end up occupying yourself with activities and people who are destructive. What you need at the time you are confused or disillusioned is to surround yourself with believers who can encourage, carry part of the load, help you perceive things that you might not notice. Again, it's why LifeGroups are so important—it's why my LifeGroup is so important to me—because they help me wait upon the Lord and see things I cannot see on my own.

Climb out of your cave, find Christian friends and, third, do what you know. Why did the disciples go back to fishing during this season of confusion? Because it is what they knew; it was familiar to them. It gave them comfort to be in familiar waters, literally. There's an old saying: "God can't steer your ship unless it's moving." Sometimes when people lose sight of their vision or lose heart in their call, they hunker down to just wait until God shows them what He wants them to do. Occasionally God works that way, but more often, God appears as you faithfully go about your business in life. It may not be exciting. It may not feel productive—like fishing all night and not catching anything—but it is often out of a season of dry faithfulness that Christ calls us to something new and life giving.

Climb out of your cave, find Christian friends, do what you know and give it time. When our plans or dreams don't turn out like we imagined, it is sometimes tempting to hurry up and develop Plan B. Especially for some of us. Plan A didn't work. Okay, here's Plan B... and behind that, C, D, E. That is my tendency. I don't like to sit in limbo. I would rather do something—even if it's the wrong thing—than to do nothing. Which, of course, is crazy. I don't think anyone likes to be patient; it is an acquired habit. But it is part of the spiritual fruit that Paul describes in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience... Ahhh, there it is! Part of the value of going back to that which is familiar is that it gives you time... time to heal, time to learn, time to slow down, time to listen, time to grow.

How do you deal with those wistful times when your dreams are dead and your future uncertain? Climb out of your cave, find Christian friends, do what you know, give it time... and then, when the Lord calls, jump in with reckless abandon! When Jesus appeared on the shore, they didn't recognize him at first. So, it's a little surprising that they would take his advice, go to the hassle of pulling in those heavy nets and dropping them just on the other side of the boat, but for some reason, they did. And of course, they pulled in a record catch. You know there must have been a fisherman in the crowd because they even counted the catch. 153 fish!

It is only then that John realizes who was shouting advice from the shore. "It is the Lord!" he tells everyone else. In fact, that phrase is repeated three times in the story! "It is the Lord!" That is all Peter needs. He was standing there stark naked—which was the custom for fishermen—but when he realizes it is Jesus, he throws on a robe and then plunges into the water. They were only 100 yards from shore, but that was 100 yards too far. Peter longed to be with the Lord... he had unfinished business—which we will deal with next week— and when the opportunity presented itself, he plunged into the waters. Recklessly! He was not going to miss this moment.

I'm not much for quoting Shakespeare, but I have a favorite phrase from the Bard that I keep on my computer. It comes from Julius Caesar and goes like this: "There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries." In other words, when the tide comes in, you had better sail on to your fortune because if you don't, you will miss your opportunity and be stuck in the mud.

How many of you remember this scene from Forrest Gump? [Show clip of him jumping out of boat to get to Lieutenant Dan.] Don't you think that is exactly the way Peter felt when John said, "It is the Lord? Peter was not about to miss his opportunity.

Every single one of us—from new Confirmands, to those newly married, to parents sending kids off to college, to Senior Pastors—will go through times of uncertainty... the death of a vision... disappointment. Every one of us will think

wistfully about how things might have turned out, and find ourselves saying, “If only...” That is a sucker’s game. One of my favorite lines from Jesus goes like this: “No one who sets his hand to the plow and looks back over his shoulder is fit for the Kingdom of God.” Things haven’t turned out like you dreamed? You feel like your vision has died, and you’re not sure what you should do next. Maybe you should go fishing. But keep your eyes open. Jesus is not done with you yet.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don’t teach! Listen and reflect on God’s word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. Discuss what just occurred in chapter 20. In light of that, what do you think about 7 of the disciples going on a fishing trip? Good, bad, indifferent? Why?
 2. Pastor Mark suggests that they were still struggling with the death of a vision. What does he mean by that? Do you agree?
 3. How does Jesus’ encounter with them rekindle the vision that had perhaps withered? What does he say and do that encourages them?
 4. Think of a time YOUR dreams failed. How did you move beyond that disappointment to a new sense of hope and purpose?