

“Which Question?”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
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John 21:1-19

We don't know why the disciples went back to fishing in Galilee after their encounter with the Risen Christ in Jerusalem. Maybe they needed a little down time to process what had happened, or maybe sheer financial necessity compelled them to take up their former vocation. Remember Judas kept the common purse. After he left the Last Supper to betray Jesus, he appeared only once more in John's gospel, at the garden where Jesus was arrested.

Considering what Jesus said to them in the locked room where they hid, “As the Father sent me, so I send you,” it seems even more unusual that they would scamper away on a fishing expedition. Jesus clearly meant for them to continue his work in the world. Returning to their ordinary lives probably isn't what Jesus had in mind.

Of course, we can forgive them this little detour. We do it, too, from time to time. Jesus reveals himself through bread and wine, baptismal waters, and the word, and then Monday morning comes, and it's back to business as usual. Our petty grievances seethe, and the worries – real and imagined, great and small – consume our thoughts and energies, as we strive to make ends meet, stave off boredom, settle debts and scores, and a host of other things that feel terribly important at the time, until something presumably more important takes their place. In a way we may not entirely like, we are unflatteringly similar to those first disciples, who saw the Risen Christ, and basically went back to what they were doing before he arrived in their lives.

We don't know why the disciples didn't recognize Jesus. He had appeared to them in that locked room in Jerusalem, where they did know who he was. They couldn't have forgotten what he looked like. It's interesting that when Jesus greeted them on the shore, they had the exact same reaction as Mary Magdalene did as she wept at the empty tomb. Remember how she thought Jesus was the gardener?

There are many theories to explain why Mary and the other disciples couldn't consistently recognize Jesus. Perhaps his resurrected body was transformed in a way that made him look different, or perhaps Jesus looked precisely the same, but the fact of his resurrection was so amazing, that those original disciples couldn't quite accept that it was really him. It's a mystery we can't solve, but we also have this problem.

Jesus doesn't always look the way we expect him to look. We have in our minds the way Jesus ought to look, the way we want him to look, but then we discover, much to our chagrin, that Jesus appears how he is, not as we might wish him to be. Jesus can be uncomfortably demanding, instead of cute and cuddly. He is the merciful judge, a concept hard to get our minds around in the vindictive world we live in. Our eyes need to stay sharp and vigilant, our minds and hearts open and receptive, if we really want to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

We don't know why Peter was fishing naked. I've never tried it, and don't plan to. If you do, I'd appreciate you keeping that to yourself. There are some mental images even a priest can't bear. Maybe Peter fished in the buff, because he didn't want to get his clothes wet. Remember they were hauling nets, not casting lines, and they didn't have any of the hydraulic equipment that features on Discovery Channel shows, like the one Stephanie calls "all crab all the time."

What's even stranger is how Peter, upon realizing it was Jesus on the shore, put his clothes on before jumping into the water. If the point of fishing naked is to keep your clothes dry, suiting up before you take a splash in the drink sort of defeats the purpose. Maybe it was a humble modesty that inspired Peter to put his clothes on before swimming to shore. Being nude among his fellow disciples was one thing; approaching the Risen Christ in your birthday suit quite another. Again, we'll never know for sure.

Perhaps when people see the Risen Christ, even if they've seen him already, they tend to do illogical, nonsensical things they would not otherwise do. We see Jesus, and we are inspired to deviate from our normal patterns of behavior. We abandon the standards that govern our lives and plunge into a mode of operation, a way of being, that might seem bizarre to those around us, bizarre even to ourselves, if we stopped to think about it. That's the beautiful part of recognizing the Risen Christ. Jesus takes us out of our comfort zones and invites us to participate in a mystery that lifts our lives above the ordinary, often in ways that go far beyond whether our clothes will get soaked or not. This experience of transcendence is a marvelous gift we need to pursue avidly.

We do know why Jesus asked Peter three times, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" You see, the Greeks had several different words for love. One of them was *philos*, which means brotherly love. The city of Philadelphia is known as the city of brotherly love because it joins together the Greek words of *philos* and *delphia*, which means city. Another word the Greek had for love is *agape*, with which as Christians we are more familiar.

*Agape* is a limitless, unconditional type of love that comes from God alone. It is rare and worth striving for, both as recipients and givers. When Jesus asked Peter the first two times, “do you love me,” he used *agape*, according to John. Peter answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I *philos* you.” Once more, we see that Peter either didn’t understand or wasn’t up to the challenge.

So the third time, Jesus changed his verb from *agape* to *philos*, offering Peter a chance to answer as he was able. That’s classic Jesus: accessible, forgiving, generous of spirit. Peter was upset that Jesus asked him the same question three times. No doubt it brought up unpleasant memories of Peter’s three-fold denial. Peter doesn’t seem to have noticed how merciful the repetition was. Jesus adjusted his expectation of Peter in accordance with what Peter could manage, and Jesus does the same for us.

We frequently feel that we don’t have what it takes to be a real disciple of Jesus. We look at foreign missionaries and others who devote their entire lives to the service of God and the Church, and we wonder, without much hope, if we will ever stack up. In fact, we can envy their courage and commitment. In these moments of spiritual despair, we need to remember the thrice-repeated question of Jesus, who finally modified his request to meet Peter’s ability. That’s how grace works. It compensates for our inevitable inadequacies, enabling us to meet challenges that we cannot surmount on our own. Where do you think that huge abundance of fish came from? Luck? It was a manifestation of God’s abundant grace, letting us know that we will be fed spiritually, even when the waters of life seem deep and empty.

When it comes to the resurrection of Jesus and how he appears in our midst, most of the time, we simply do not know why or how. But maybe “why” and “how” aren’t the most relevant questions. Perhaps the question of “who” deserves more of our attention, because at the end of the day or when the morning dawns, the “who,” namely Jesus, is all that matters.

Yet we need to ask another question, not of the gospel or of God, but of ourselves, and that question is “what.” What will we do once we recognize the Risen Christ? Shall we go about our lives as if nothing special has happened, or will we do something slightly odd, like putting on our clothes before jumping into the water? Christ is Risen, and he waits upon the shore. Time to suit up and go for a swim. Amen.