

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, May 04, 2025

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz

on

John 21:1-19

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By Fire or Fire: The Shape of Resurrection

Barely three weeks have slipped by since the stone rolled away, and the disciples are already easing back into the muscle-memory of their former lives. The tomb is empty, the alleluias still echo across the hills of Jerusalem, and yet the friends of Jesus drift back to the water that raised them, to the life of casting and hauling, mending and hoping. Resurrection has happened; history has cracked open; and still rent has to be paid. Simon Peter simply says, “I go a fishing,” and the others answer with their own fatigue: “We also go with thee. We’ll come too.” If you don’t know what to do next, I suppose they are thinking, do what you know. And that, precisely, is where the risen Christ comes to meet them: not in fear or in hiding, but in the grey confusion of routine.

So they push the boat out under a warm Galilean night sky, and their nets trail through the dark water like unanswered prayers. “They caught nothing,” Saint John tells us, and he refuses to romanticize the emptiness. Not a sardine, not a single shimmer of silver scales, only the drag of an empty net. And so there they are in that floating disappointment and frustration, with the thin light of dawn filling the horizon, a voice slips across the water: “Children, (In Greek, Παιδια: dear ones, little ones.) Children, have ye any meat?” Not a rebuke, not a spiritual audit, but the unforced intimacy of a parent who worries whether you have eaten. So much of the Gospel is contained in that one question: God addressing the emptiness directly, but with such tenderness.

The stranger tells them, almost casually, “Cast the net on the right side.” It makes no professional sense; they know this lake the way a pianist knows the keys. Yet something in the timbre of the command feels like permission, feels like grace, so they risk the small absurdity taking the advice. Suddenly the net heaves alive: one-hundred-fifty-three great fish wrestling against the mesh, a ridiculous, lavish plenty. The boat, the lake, even the nets, are unchanged; yet the world is re-consecrated by the mere presence of this voice. Not in fireworks, but in familiarity.

The Beloved Disciple whispers, “It is the Lord.” This reminds me of St. Thomas’ confession in the Upper Room. Peter reacts with overwhelming energy: he throws on his cloak, the Greek implies he ties it around himself like a servant’s apron, and heaves his big frame overboard, thrashing desperately toward the shore. The others follow more sedately, dragging their bulging net. When they land, they find a charcoal fire already kindled, bread warming on the stones, fish sizzling and cracking. The echo is deliberate: only days ago Peter warmed his hands at another charcoal fire and found, to his horror, how quickly courage can evaporate. Now his history is rewritten: betrayal transfigured by breakfast.

Breakfast is silent, as far as John tells us. Bread is passed, fish is shared, hunger is honored. And after the embers settle Jesus turns to Simon Peter, the fisherman who once promised to die with Him and yet under the pressure in Jerusalem saw his own courage wither. Jesus says to him: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” *Agapas me?* Do you love me with that self-forgetting, divine extravagance? Peter, unable to reach so high, answers, “Lord, you know that I love you (*philo se*) I love you like a brother.” Twice the same painful exchange, Peter straining to name a love he cannot yet inhabit.

The third time Jesus changes the verb to match his. *Phileis me?* Do you even love me as a friend? The question cuts, because it slides into the very limit Peter has confessed. “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” And Jesus does know. He knows, the bravado, the shame, the tangled-up heart. Jesus knows the gap between Peter’s aspiration and his actions, and He does not scold him. Instead He offers him a vocation: “Feed my sheep. Follow me.” Love, in this kingdom, is not the gold medal presented after flawless performance; it is the call that gives the ones who stumble a future.

As it was then, so it is with us. In the resurrection, God makes space for us in His life, so that our fragmented or even broken lives can live and breathe again. That is what is happening on this beach. The disciples’ work is not discarded; fishing is not renounced. Rather, in Christ’s company their familiar trade is converted from survival to sacrament. The nets that once declared only absence now announce abundance. The shore that once symbolized failure now hosts a Eucharistic fire. The same people, the same lake, but reality viewed under the light of resurrection dawn.

And what of us who may be hauling our own weary nets, coming up empty? The Gospel reveals Christ standing on the far edge of our everyday routines, the jobs we do in the dark when no one sees, asking the simplest possible question: “How’s breakfast, my child? Have you found what feeds you?”

He is not judging us, or making a list and checking it twice; He is listening for the ache that tells the truth. When we dare to follow that voice, casting the net once more with God’s guidance, the abundance there can be quite a surprise.

Notice, though, that the abundance is communal. That miraculous Easter catch is unmanageable for a single pair of arms. John tells us the net did not tear, although it should have. Thomas, James, John, and Nathaniel all succeed in bringing the net back to shore.

Yet the story ends with a sober line. After foretelling Peter’s martyrdom, Jesus adds, “Follow me.” The grace that feeds us also summons us into a kind of danger. Love will cost Peter his life, and ours as well, though perhaps not to an end as bitter as his. To follow is to accept that one day another will guide us and carry us where we do not wish to go, into a future we did not choose, but where God waits..

So the shoreline Easter morning is not only breakfast after a long night but the very shape of Christian conversion. On Easter morning we wake to discover that Christ is alive, living in you, and in those beside you. And when Easter dawns, our days are no longer our private property. They are part of a bright,

unfolding drama, and even a commute, a conversation, a supper, it's all different now. Because Christ's pulse is in it.

John's Gospel frames that discovery between two charcoal fires. The first flares at the high-priest's courtyard, its heat fed by fear, denial, and the grim calculus of sacrifice; the second glows on the beach, where Jesus tends the embers of welcome: bread, fish, forgiveness. Together they reveal the double blaze T. S. Eliot intuited in *Little Giddings*: "we shall be consumed by either fire or fire." One flame is the furnace of apocalypse, reducing betrayals to ash; the other is the quiet fire of the Kingdom coming, the Spirit's hospitality that warms strangers into friends. And it is precisely this second fire that answers Christ's longing in Luke: "I came to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49).

So then, what remains? Only this: not whether we shall burn, but where we will stand. Which fireside? May we stand beside the beach fire of resurrection: the breakfast blaze that feeds, forgives, and sends us out to live lives no longer our own, aflame with the love that made the world.

Amen.
