

The New Normal
John 21:1–14 (15–19)
Sunday, July 4, 2021

You've heard the expression, "You can never go home again?"

I remember the first time I came home from college for the summer. This was in a time before cell phones and text messages and really before email was widespread. So when I left to go to college six hours away, I was essentially out of touch with my friends back home for nine months. I hadn't *seen* them or *talked* to them, so I was really excited to get back home and catch up and hang out like we used to do.

But what I quickly found was that it wasn't quite the same as before. Some of my friends had gone away to college. Some of them had stayed home and worked. We had all had different experiences and started to go down different paths. Some of them had changed, and some of them had stayed exactly the same, and I wasn't sure which one was worse. But *I* had changed and *they* had changed, both in *good* ways and *bad*. Even the church I grew up in; they had called a new pastor, and some people had died while I was gone, new members had joined. Life had kept going on without me, and I didn't quite feel at home there anymore. I had *thought* that I could go home and it would be just like it was before; that I could pick up right where I left off. And in some ways I *could*, while in other ways I *couldn't*.

That saying, "You can never go home again," was popularized in the 1940s by author Thomas Wolfe. He wrote, "You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame... away from all the strife and conflict of the world, back home to the father you have lost and have been looking for, back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, *back*

home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time – back home to the escapes of Time and Memory.” Wolfe’s point being that you can never really go back to the way things *were*, to the way that we hold them in our *minds*, because time moves on, life keeps going, and everything inevitably changes. And so we have to *choose* whether we will continue to live in the way things *were*, or acknowledge things for what they really are and live in that new normal.

This is essentially where we find Jesus’ disciples in our reading from John’s gospel. Jesus has risen from the dead and appeared to the disciples on Easter Sunday and then again a week later when he tells Thomas to touch the wounds in his hands and his side; not to *doubt* but to *believe*. Then John says, “After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias.” So while we don’t know *exactly* how much time has passed, we know that it has been at least a week since Jesus rose from the dead in Jerusalem. The Sea of Tiberias is in Galilee, about *80 miles away*. The disciples have gone back home.

It says that those present were Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John, and two others of his disciples. Only seven of the remaining eleven disciples are there. The others, we don’t know *where* they are, but they aren’t *there*. Presumably, *they* have gone back home, too. The group is not *together* anymore. After three years of ministry together, Jesus’ disciples have gone back to pick up their lives after the death of their teacher and his incomprehensible resurrection.

They just want things to be the way they used to be. They want to get back to normal, routine life. So Peter gets the idea, “I’m going fishing, just like I used to do before all this happened.” And the others say, “That sounds good. That sounds *normal*, like the way things used to be. We’ll go with you!” So they go out in the boat, just like old times. They go fishing, just like

they used to do with Jesus. And after the whirlwind of the past few weeks, not to mention the past three years they spent with Jesus, everything seems to be calming down and getting back to normal. They spend all night out in the boat, just enjoying the feel of the life they used to know. It's almost as if they are trying to pretend the resurrection never happened.

But as day breaks the next morning, the resurrection breaks back into their lives with it. A voice calls out to them from the shore, about a hundred yards away, telling them that if they put their nets on the *other* side of the boat, they will catch fish. They do what the stranger says, and suddenly their nets are stretched to the seams with fish! That's all it takes for John to recognize and say to Peter, "It's the Lord!"

They had tried to resume their lives and go on like nothing had happened at that empty tomb or the locked room where Jesus appeared to them. But the resurrection disrupts all of that; it disrupts the normalcy they are trying to recapture. The resurrection has *changed reality*, and they can't evade it any longer. It is right there, 100 yards away from them, on the shore.

And so the first thing Peter does when the resurrection breaks back into his life is...put his clothes on. Because apparently Peter liked to fish naked. He jumps into the water and swims to the shore, hurrying as fast as he can to get to Jesus. The disciples follow after him in the boat, and when they all get to the shore and reunite with their resurrected friend, they have breakfast. So now they are sitting around a fire with someone who just a week or so earlier was *dead*. The disciples have tried to go back home and return to normal, but this is about as far from *normal* as their lives can get.

The resurrection of Christ has changed *everything*. It has broken into their lives and disrupted their return to normal. It won't let them go back to the way things *were*, to the old patterns of life, to what Thomas Wolfe calls "the old forms and systems of things." It has called them to a *new* way of life; a way of life characterized by love of *God* and love of *neighbor*.

And, you know, just like the disciples, *we* try to resume our normal lives after Easter, pretending, *hoping* that the resurrection hasn't changed anything. We want to go back to the way things *used* to be, *before* there was a risen savior. Life was so much easier then. We want to put Jesus back in that tomb until next Easter, when we let him out for one day, say, "Christ is risen," sing his praises, and then lock him back up again. Just like we talked about last week with Christmas and the implications of God becoming human, we limit our celebration of Easter and the resurrection of Christ to one special day of the year, because we want our lives to be predictable and normal and safe and comfortable, and the resurrection challenges all of that. It presents us with a reality that we aren't all that eager to face and live into because such massive change (and its *implications* for us) is *scary*.

So, just like the disciples, we go back to the old patterns of life. The old patterns of treating people. The old patterns of our relationship with God. The old patterns of how we understand the world to work. The old patterns of sin and selfishness. The old patterns of ignoring the sick and the hungry. The old patterns of justifying violence and oppression against our neighbors. The old patterns of materialism and addiction and fear. We go back home to that because it's what we've always known. It's comfortable and easy and orderly, because you only have to worry about yourself and no one else. We pick up our lives where we left off on Saturday, when Christ was still in the tomb and the resurrection wasn't even *conceivable*, and we try to go on like nothing has ever happened.

But the resurrection of Christ has changed *everything*. It has changed the way that the world works. And just like it broke into the disciples' lives with the break of day, just like it broke into their lives as Jesus' voice broke the silence of the morning, the resurrection breaks into *our* world and *our* lives in ways that are impossible for us to ignore, in ways that challenge how our lives are ordered. The resurrection says that we have been set free from sin and death to live in *new ways* with God and with one another. The resurrection says that we no longer have to worry about our *own* lives, about providing for ourselves, about looking out only for ourselves. Through the resurrection of Jesus, God has provided *new life* for us and made it possible for us to live our lives, not for ourselves, but for God and one another.

After they eat breakfast, Jesus says to Peter three times, "Do you love me? Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Just as I have fed *you*, now *you* feed others. Just as I have provided for *your* life, now *you* provide for the lives of others. If you love me, then you *have* to perform life-giving acts of love to others." The resurrection presents us with the startling, shocking, unbelievable claim that God has given us a second chance at life. And because of that, we have to share that gift, that new life, with the world. The resurrection has called us out of the normal, safe, comfortable life lived for ourselves, and into the new world that God is creating, where we live for one another. The resurrection has changed the way that our lives work, and there is no possible way we can pretend that didn't happen. It will find a way, one way or another, to break into our lives and say, as Jesus did, "Follow me."

As we emerge from this long year of pandemic and begin to resume our life together – especially this week, going back into the sanctuary – there can be a feeling of, "We're going back to normal." How many times have we all *thought* that or *said* that over the past year? "I can't wait

until things are back to normal.” But there is also a sense in which we can’t just go back to the way things were and pick up right where we left off, like nothing happened. There are ways in which this experience is going to be with us for a long time, ways in which it has *changed* us and changed how we are called to live life together and be Christ’s church. There are things we’ll want to hold onto coming out of this, and there are things that we have to let go of. The question is whether we will continue to live in the way things *were*, or acknowledge things for what they really are and live into this new normal.

And I don’t just mean masks or hand sanitizers or the pandemic. This is a moment in which we *all* have the opportunity to *start over*. To be the people that we want to be and the *church* that we want to be. If you have ever said, “I want to be more involved. I want to come to worship more. I want to get better about praying or reading the Bible. I want to do more mission work.” This is a chance to *do* that. If you have had a problem or a conflict with someone else in the church (or in your life), and you’ve wanted to *reconcile* that. This is a new beginning for *all* of us. It’s like we’re *all* starting this new chapter in our lives, and we can make it whatever we want it to *be*.

But as we come to the Lord’s table today, we are reminded that the new normal that the risen Christ calls us to live into is to follow him by feeding his sheep, caring for those that Christ cares about, loving those that Christ loves. It’s a life lived beyond ourselves and our egos and fears. As *individuals*, we are called to be broken and poured out for *others*, and as a *church* we are called to be broken and poured out for the *world*, as Christ was for us. To live new lives, marked by love of God and love of neighbor. And we *show* our love for God by loving and feeding and caring for our neighbors. How do we want to do *that*?

Christ is risen! Not just one day 2,000 years ago, but *then, now, and forever*. And we are called to *live the resurrected life with Christ* – not just to *believe* in the resurrection of Jesus or to *celebrate* it, but to *be the site where resurrection takes place*, in our hearts and our minds and our lives. Amen.