

Found, Fed, Sent
Isaiah 61:1-3, John 21:1-19
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In the first couple of weeks after Easter, the lectionary Gospel texts are about appearances that Jesus made to his disciples. John's accounts about Jesus's post resurrection appearances along with Luke's account about the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus are a little mysterious. When Mary first sees Jesus outside the empty tomb, and when those disciples encountered Jesus on the road, and in the passage we just read, Jesus appears but for some reason he is unrecognizable to the disciples at first. It's a little strange, and then, in the story we heard last week about Jesus's appearance to the disciples- the one that Thomas missed - it seems as if the resurrected Jesus somehow has the ability to pass through doors like a ghost or something. The disciples are all locked in a room and suddenly Jesus just appears in their midst somehow. Again, it's a bit strange, and alongside these mysterious elements there is sense of uncertainty that's hanging in the air in these accounts. The disciples don't yet really know what is happening, or what it means, or what's going to happen next. It's clear from the texts that in the early days after his resurrection, Jesus's followers were in what is called a liminal space.

Liminal spaces are those spaces and places in between. You're on the way to somewhere or something new but you haven't quite arrived. Things may be unclear and foggy. Sometimes this can feel exciting, but many times we experience it as an uncomfortable or scary space. Anxiety often runs high in these times. As a church, we just experienced a liminal time together when we were between music directors and Susan filled in as our interim. The Covid pandemic is another good example of a liminal time that we

experienced collectively, and if you think back to how you felt during that time, you probably remember feeling disoriented, or sad, or anxious. We didn't know what was going to happen, or how long it was going to last, or what life would be like on the other side of it. It was uncomfortable and stressful. We all have personal experiences with liminal times, too. When you've lost or left a job but haven't figured out what you're doing next. After a spouse passes or after a divorce, there is a time of disorientation and ambiguity. We can't quite picture the future that we know will be different from what we've known. I vividly remember the discomfort and discontent that came in that liminal space when I was making the transition between being a child and being a grown up. I remember sitting in a computer lab in college during my freshman year thinking to myself, "I still need my parents, and I actually don't know what I'm doing (that admission we all wait for our 18 or 19 year old children to make!), but I'm not just a kid anymore. I've taken on new responsibilities and there are things my parents aren't here to do for me anymore." I remember those years being exciting but also often emotionally difficult.

We all go through these times, and as uncomfortable as they may be, there is no way to avoid them. They are just part of being human, part of life, part of the growth and change process, and they're part of our spiritual lives and our relationship with Jesus, too. Jesus is the anchor for our lives, but we are meant to change and grow as we walk with Jesus. Our faith is meant to deepen and mature, and we are meant to become more and more like Christ. Often, this growing, and changing, and being transformed is something that happens when we find ourselves in these ambiguous and uncertain times. Liminal times create some of the best opportunities for walking by faith and not by sight. They are times that gives us opportunities to adapt and change. They present us with new opportunities to do things we haven't done before and to see and understand things that we just didn't have to see or try to understand

before. This is all good, but because the liminal space and time is so filled with uncertainty and discomfort, we don't always welcome them. We would rather not walk through those times. We would rather live with certainty and for everything to remain predictable which at least gives us the illusion of being in control. We would rather not face challenges and questions that force us to re-evaluate our existing beliefs and behaviors. We would much rather walk by sight than by faith. We want the clearly marked way with plenty of bright lights and bill board signs, but in reality, when we follow Jesus, the road is rarely a straight line, there never seem to be as many road signs as we'd like, and we aren't always sure what is in store for us next.

When we are going through the experience of trying to follow Jesus and be faithful in an ambiguous time, and our ability to see is limited, and we aren't getting the answers that we want, it can cause us to feel anxious or impatient in general and sometimes with God. We might start to worry that we've been abandoned and left to struggle through without help. We may find it difficult to believe that God really is leading us to any kind of destination on the other side of the disorientation that we've experiencing. Being in a liminal place can feed the doubts that Brian talked about last week, and it can cause us to feel stuck and unmotivated to keep going, but these times don't have to lead to our undoing. If they are part of life, and if they bring opportunities for spiritual growth and transformation, we can be sure that God isn't going to waste those times and seasons, and we can be sure that Jesus will be working in the midst of them and leading us through them. In our Gospel passage this morning, we see how Jesus met the disciples when they were on the way to understanding and to the next stage in their relationship with Jesus. He ministers to them and the good news is that he continues to minister in this way to us and to all of his disciples who are still on the

way, still passing through times of disillusionment, disorientation, uncertainty, and change. Let's look at what Jesus does.

The first thing is that he finds the disciples and makes himself known to them. The fact that Jesus finds them is an important detail. They weren't looking for Jesus because they didn't know where to look for him. They had no idea when, or where, or if he would show up again, and they were just doing something familiar as they continued to process all of the things that had happened recently and waited and wondered about what would come next. That's when Jesus *found them*, and when he found them, he made sure that they knew that it was him. This is what the great catch is all about in this story, or at least in part. It's a sign like all of the other signs and miracles in the Gospel of John that are meant to reveal Jesus. It's a sign that opens the disciples' eyes and enables them to recognize Jesus.

After finding the disciples, the second thing Jesus does is he meets them on the shore where he feeds them and gives them the nourishment that they need after their long night of fishing. The disciples would have remembered the time when Jesus had taken two small fish and five loaves and multiplied them into more than enough food for a crowd of 5000 people- how could you forget that? Now, after the resurrection, on the beach that morning, they were given assurance that Jesus would still feed them and give them what they needed.

The third thing Jesus does comes after breakfast when he pulls Peter aside for a conversation. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him, a number that corresponds with the number of times that Peter had denied knowing Jesus on the night of his arrest. Peter answers three times saying, "yes, Lord, you know I love you," and each time Peter answers, Jesus gives him the clear instruction, "feed

my sheep.” We know this event as Peter’s reinstatement. After his great failure, Jesus lets him know that his failure hasn’t disqualified him from carrying on Jesus’s ministry as he goes forward. It brings to my mind an image of Peter stumbling and falling to the ground, and here Jesus helps him up, brushes the dust off, and says, “get back out there.” Whatever happened, happened, but I am still sending you to love and serve others in my name. After this, Jesus repeats his original invitation to Peter, saying, “Follow me.”

I love that the last thing that Jesus says to Peter here is one of the first things that Jesus said to Peter in Scripture because it reiterates to me the truth that Jesus’s call to us is unchanging and consistent even if we change or the things around us change. Jesus found me when I was a child and called me to be his disciple. I have been through many changes and stages of life, experienced good times and difficult times. All kinds of things around me have changed, but through all of the ages, and stages, and changes, Jesus’s call to me has remained the same. Follow me. This is true for all of us.

The other thing that is true is that this pattern that we see in this story – where the disciples are found, fed, and sent- is something that happens when we initially put our faith in Christ, but it’s a pattern that gets repeated again and again as we walk with Jesus. In a true sense, when we are spiritually lost and Jesus finds us, we can never be lost again. His love will not let us go and we can be sure of that, but at the level of our lived experience and our feelings, there are plenty of times when we feel lost. We don’t know what to do next. We aren’t sure what the right decision is. We don’t feel like we’re seen or being cared for, but these are times when Jesus finds us again. He comes to us, and in some way, he makes himself known to us again. He finds us, and then he feeds us. Jesus doesn’t expect us to follow him and keep following him without feeding us and giving us the nourishment that

we need. In every season and circumstance of our lives, he makes himself available to us, and this promise is confirmed in the sacrament that we receive today. He invites us to come again and again to come and eat with him and to receive the food that sustains us and carries us through, and after he has fed us, he sends us out again to keep feeding and loving and serving his sheep. When we make mistakes along the way like Peter, if we have some big failure, Jesus meets us with mercy. He picks us up and dusts us off and says to us, “get back out there.”

Today, where ever you may be in your journey with Jesus, or whatever stage or season you are going through in your life, especially if you find yourself in a time like the one the disciples experienced just after the resurrection when you aren’t exactly sure what God is doing, or what you’re supposed to be doing, or what is going to happen next, know that you are not alone and Jesus’s call to you remains the same. Follow me, he says. Follow me in the good times. Follow me in the confusing times. Follow me in the times when you’re angry or sad. Follow me, and I will lead you through everything. Amen.