**GREENLAND HILLS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**April 30, 2017

SCRIPTURE** John 21:1-14

Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee’s sons, and two other disciples were together. Simon Peter told them, “I’m going fishing.” They said, “We’ll go with you.” They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn’t realize it was Jesus. Jesus called to them, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?” They answered him, “No.” He said, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn’t haul in the net. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water.

The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they weren’t far from shore, only about one hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you’ve just caught.” Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn’t torn, even with so many fish. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

**SERMON** *The Other Side of the Boat* Roy Atwood

I think it’s safe to say that we as Americans like our epilogues. Yes, that’s right – our epilogues, those intriguing codas that wrap up the loose ends and point to an intriguing future beyond the scope of whatever book we’re reading or movie we’re watching. It seems like every summer blockbuster has an epilogue these days. It’s gotten to the point that when the movie ends, we’re trained to stay in our seats as the credits roll. Somehow, some people still haven’t learned. They get up, start to head to the exits, only to be left standing awkwardly in the aisle when the epilogue begins to play. Incredibly, we’ve combined our insatiable desire for more with our extreme impatience, so that movie epilogues start playing 30 seconds into the credits, saving us from actually having to wait for that witty scene that wasn’t clever enough to put in the actual movie.

But then there’s that small chance that the filmmakers put a scene at the very end of the credits, creating one of the most difficult conundrums we face in the modern world. We start up an internal debate. Will the scene be any good? How dumb will I feel if there isn’t one? Is it worth waiting for the names of every living person in a small nation to scroll past? How badly do we need to go to the bathroom after drinking a liter and a half of soda? What are the odds the scene is on YouTube anyway? In the end, we’re still trying to decide if it’s worth the wait when the scene finally plays, and it’s hardly ever worth it.

 The epilogues of books can be a bit more memorable. Of course, we all remember the epilogue of the Harry Potter series where we finally found out that that one main character married that other main character, and some other main characters got married too, and they all named their kids after other main characters – very touching. I did almost cry after the epilogue to the Hunger Games series. Considering the last book came out 7 years ago and they made a movie about it, I think I’m allowed to give away the ending. Throughout the final installment of the series, one of the characters struggles with his memory, so he’s constantly asking the question – real or not real? – to check his understanding of the world. This happened, real or not real? I did this, real or not real? And then, the book ends with this sequence of thoughts from the main character: What I need to survive is not someone else’s fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again. And only he can give me that. So after, when he whispers, “You love me. Real or not real?” I tell him, “Real.”

 Which serves as a perfect segue to the promise that life can go on that we find in the epilogue of the Gospel of John. We’re doing a brief sermon series following Easter entitled *Dead People Don’t Stay Dead* where we’re looking at John’s story of life after the resurrection. Last week we read the end of John chapter 20 and talked about how death necessarily proceeds resurrection and that just because something or someone dies, doesn’t mean that death is the end of the story. In John chapter 20, we see that the story continues after Jesus’s death, with his resurrection appearances to the disciples hiding behind locked doors in Jerusalem. That chapter ends like this: Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples’ presence, signs that aren’t recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

 Doesn’t that sound like a nice way to end the book? It puts a bow on the story of Jesus and explains the author’s intentions – he wrote the book so that we can believe in Jesus and have life in his name. But of course we have more questions. What happened to the disciples? Where did they go? What did they do? And who got married to whom? As we metaphorically turn the page, we find a chapter 21 beginning with the word “later”. The author of John has given us the epilogue we crave.

 The first item of note here is the setting – the disciples have gone back to fishing on the Sea of Tiberias, more commonly known as the Sea of Galilee. After all the drama of the crucifixion and the resurrection, we find the disciples right back to where they were before Jesus called them, as if nothing had even happened. In response to the difficulty of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, they went back home, to something comfortable and familiar. I think we can relate to the disciples here. Many of us have a place we like to escape to in difficult times, be it a weekend getaway destination or a local slice of nature, a favorite store or a specific nook in our house. I’m reminded of the time one of my younger brothers went through a difficult period while he was in high school. One of his youth leaders had just been arrested and he didn’t have anywhere to turn, so he decided he would go visit me in college for a bit. The only problem was that I went to college in Atlanta, 12 hours away. He was driving my old car with my old GPS in it, so, telling my parents he was going to school early, he found my dorm’s address, plugged it in, and headed west. It wasn’t until he got a ticket for going 90 miles per hour at the Louisiana/Mississippi border that he thought, maybe this wasn’t the greatest idea, so he turned around and headed back. When he got home that night, he put the ticket and the car keys on the kitchen counter, said “I’m grounded,” and went straight to his room. In a way, this is what the disciples did – except they made it all the way to their destination and returned to their comfortable, old routines, pretending as if the whole Jesus experience had never happened.

 So of course, the Jesus of infinite forgiveness comes back from the grave to kindly point them back in the right direction. He calls to them from the shore, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?” The Greek word for children here is *paidion* (pie-dee-on), and it is not a word you use to speak to adults. It means children, as it’s translated, and it is particularly used for infants. Now, multiple commentaries I read said that Jesus is calling the disciples children as a term of endearment, casting himself in the role of a loving, fatherly figure. But I wonder if a better interpretation isn’t the opposite – that he’s a little frustrated that after everything he taught them, they still don’t understand the purpose of his ministry. So, he yells at them from the edge of the lake, “Hey little kids, you manage to catch any fish out there?”

 They haven’t, so Jesus tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. Now, these boats aren’t particularly big. In 1986, some local fishermen of the Sea of Galilee actually found a boat submerged in the mud that was later dated to be from the time of Jesus. It’s now on display in a little museum on the coast right near where the boat was found, and I saw it when I visited Israel earlier this year. The boat is about seven and a half feet across, and there’s good reason to believe that the disciples’ boat would have been about the same size. So, there’s no reason to think that, if there are no fish on the left side of the boat, then there will be fish on the right side of the boat. But somehow, when the disciples do what Jesus said, and throw their nets on the right side of the boat, they catch a ton of fish. Now of course, we can read this story at a surface level, assume some sort of miracle happened, and just move on with our lives. But I think it’s instructive to try to discern what the author of John, and by extension Jesus himself, are trying to teach us here.

 I think the key phrase, on which this whole story turns, is that Jesus asked the disciples to throw their nets on the right side of the boat. It makes sense to throw nets on the left side of the boat, since you would then pull the nets back into the boat primarily with your right arm, which for most of us is stronger than your left arm. Presumably, the left side of the boat was where the disciples had been doing their fishing. But when you cast your nets on the other side of the boat – on the right side – like Jesus is instructing, pulling those nets in is going to be awkward and uncomfortable, more difficult because your left arm isn’t as strong and you’re simply not accustomed to retrieving your nets from this side.

 So, what if we took this guidance to put out our nets on the other side of the boat and applied it to our lives today? After all, this story is part of John’s epilogue that points to the future after the gospel ends, giving us a sneak peek at the lives of Jesus’s followers after his death and resurrection. We are members of that Christian tradition, and so in a way, we are encapsulated by the disciples in that boat. How have we, as Easter people worshipping a resurrected Jesus, simply found contentment in doing what is routine and comfortable? Sure, we’re kind people, but that doesn’t mean we won’t be rude when the situation calls for it. And we’re forgiving, but the other person better show at least a little remorse. And we give of our time and money, but only when it’s convenient and it fits into the leftover we haven’t already allotted in our calendars or budgets. And we love everyone, but mostly the people who think like we do and those other people who insist on pushing their obviously incorrect agendas can go crawl in a ditch somewhere and the world would probably be better off.

 But Jesus has come back from the dead to tell us to get out of our comfort zones and throw our nets on the other side of the boat. What this looks like will be different for all of us. It may be reaching out to an estranged friend or family member. It may be making intentional sacrifices in order to give more to charity and those in need. It may be altering a career path toward something more directly benefiting society as a whole. I don’t know what it will look like, but I do know that Jesus is calling each and every one of us to take up that mantle.

 Why? Well, when we look back at the story, we see the benefits of casting the nets on the right side of the boat. Against all odds, the disciples catch so many fish that they can hardly haul in the net. In the end, they count 153 fish. Why 153 exactly? Surely, that precise of a number must mean something, but it’s not quite clear what. Some commentaries say it represents the number of countries in the world, some say 153 is the number of known species of fish at the time, but nothing is conclusive. Speaking of fish, it reminds me of a scene from Finding Nemo, where Marlin and Dory travel with the turtles in the East Australian Current. The kid turtle instructs them on leaving the current, saying, “First, crank a hard cutback as you hit the wall. There’s a screaming bottom curve, so watch out. Remember rip it, roll it, and punch it.” to which Marlin replies, “It’s like he’s trying to speak to me. I know it.” It’s like the author of John is trying to speak to us with these 153 fish, but we’re not quite sure what it means.

 Regardless, we can be sure that the benefits of switching to the uncomfortable side of the boat are numerous. The disciples catch so many fish that they’re surprised their nets haven’t torn. The author of John tells us that if we respond to the resurrection, not by retreating to comfortable routines, but by listening to the teachings of Jesus and going out of our way to do the extraordinary, then we will achieve the incredible. Imagine the church as a hotbed of radical, revolutionary, alternative methods of communicating unconditional love with the world. We can be that church. And that would certainly be an epilogue worth waiting around for. Amen.