

The Risen Christ is in Control

John 21:1-14 (NIV)

¹ Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. ⁵ He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. ⁶ He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. ⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus said, "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." (Matthew 28:10) Jesus had already appeared to the disciples twice, and he appeared to Peter a separate time on top of that. The disciples knew that Jesus had risen from the dead. They didn't really need a reminder anymore. But Jesus had told them to go to Galilee. So, that's what they were going to do.

Once there, four of the disciples went off somewhere else, maybe to visit family or friends, but the other seven - Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two others - were together. But Peter couldn't just sit around doing nothing. He decided to go do something he knew how to do and knew how to do well. "I'm going fishing," he says. The other six responded, "We're going with you."

We know that at least three of these disciples were experienced fishermen. Before they met Jesus, this was their livelihood. They worked their family businesses, businesses that were doing well enough that they had hired hands, other workers who took their places when they followed Jesus at his calling of them. They went out at night because experience had taught them that's the best time to fish the Sea of Galilee. They worked the waters. They put the net down. And they put it down again. And again. And again. Each time they brought it on up, the net was empty. No fish. Their little fishing trip to pass the time until Jesus showed up was met with failure.

How many times have you been - metaphorically speaking - in the same boat as the disciples? How many times have you put all your efforts into doing something that you know how to do well and be successful at and yet come up empty? When this happens, we immediately want to find out why we are failing. Did I miss a step? Is there something that I neglected to do that I normally would never have forgotten to do? You check over your list - mental or physical - and examine it carefully two or three times. If I were fishing, did I use the right bait? Did I pick the right spot? Is my net secure or does it have some weak links, some holes that the fish are exploiting? Did I scare the fish off?

But as you go over the list, you realize that you're not doing anything wrong. You are doing it the right way, but still no results. So now you start examining the things that you can't control. If you were fishing, you ask yourself if this area is overfished? Has something else scared the fish off, maybe a predator? Is this just not my day? When we have eliminated all the variables that we can control, that we can fix, but you are still coming up empty, you want to throw your hands up. Why is this happening? I'm doing everything right, but I'm getting nowhere! Why should I even bother doing this?!

Disappointed, disgruntled, depressed, we turn to one place that we have not yet considered. Maybe God is thwarting my best efforts. Maybe he is causing these repeated failures. Our frustrations lash out at the God who is supposedly in control of all things and we pour our anger and our complaints out on him. "Why are you doing this to me?! I'm faithful! I'm doing this right! What do you want of me?!" You're ready to give up and seethe your anger at God.

For the disciples out fishing, the sun was now peeking over the horizon. Prime fishing time was at an end. It was almost time to pack up with nothing to show for their efforts. There was a man on the shore who calls to the disciples out fishing. As if to add insult to injury he asked, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" (verse 5) It's a question asked expecting a "no" answer. This man who they don't

even know, who hasn't been out here working his tail off like the rest of the disciples, he's rubbing it in that they don't have any fish. They don't know if he wants fish or whatever, but disciples' answer is a simple "No." No explanation. No complementary words. It's a blunt answer. Maybe a dash of disappointment seasoned in. They didn't want to talk about their failure after their best efforts.

Hearing the answer he anticipated, the man standing on the shore proceeded to give unsolicited advice. He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." (verse 6) There was probably a moment of exchanged exhausted glances among the disciples, looks of "We've already tried that" to "What does he know?".

Regardless of whether or not they thought it was a worthwhile idea, they listened to the man on the shore. They dropped their net on the right side of the boat. "When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish." (verse 6) Success! Finally! All from the advice of that stranger on shore.

Maybe the sun was now high enough and there was enough light because John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, recognized the stranger on the shore. "It is the Lord!" As soon as he heard this, Peter wrapped his outer garment around him and threw himself into the water. The disciples followed in the boat, towing the net with the huge catch of fish. When the disciples get to the shore, they see Jesus tending a fire of burning coals with fish and bread already on it.

Jesus told the disciples, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." (verse 10) The disciples haul in the net. The count is off the charts for them: 153 large fish! Yet, "even with so many the net was not torn." (verse 11) Before they can even bring the fish they had caught, Jesus invites his disciples to breakfast. He gives them fish and bread to eat. All the while the disciples don't even dare to ask "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. (verse 12)

In that moment, Jesus was teaching his disciples without even telling them what he was teaching them. Not only was he confirming again that he really is risen from the dead and that he keeps his Word by meeting them in Galilee, but his lesson was about fishing, about their efforts, their failures, their success. The disciples knew their trade as fishermen. They did everything right as they went out fishing that night, yet they failed to catch any fish. Then Jesus shows up. He tells them where to put the net, probably in a place where they have already dropped it several times already, but this time it's different. This time a huge number of fish swim into the net. The disciples have to drag the catch to shore because they can't even haul it into the boat. Jesus tells them to bring some of the fish that they have caught even though he clearly already has fish and bread prepared for them. The disciples count the fish and the final tally is unbelievable! What's more is that they notice that the net, which shouldn't have held up under that much weight, didn't even tear. Plain and simple, this was a miracle from the risen Lord.

The point of this fishing story is not tell us how we can earn success. The take away is not simply "Listen to Jesus and you will have success in this life." No, you can do everything right and still be met with failure. Jesus' unspoken lesson is that no matter our efforts, it is the risen Christ who is in control of all things.

The disciples are going to need this message for the future going forward. When they go out as fishers of men, as proclaimers of Christ as the one and only Savior of all humankind, they are going to do everything right and yet sometimes be met with failure. Other times they will be met with success. For every baptism and every non-baptism, for everyone who returns for another sermon and everyone who never returns again, for everyone who comes to call themselves a Christian and for everyone who picks up a stone wanting to kill them, Jesus just showed them that the risen Christ is in control.

We do not hold the rights to success, but the risen Christ does. I can do everything right and still fail, but that's okay. I'm not the one in control; the risen Christ is. That means that when I do put all my best efforts forward in work, in planning, in caring for someone, in teaching someone, my success does not hinge on my efforts. No, it is the risen Lord's to give. And he is the one who says that he works all things for my good, and that includes the disastrous failures in my life. This gives me confidence to work hard because I know that my good and gracious God knows what the best outcome is to give me. So, whether we fail or succeed, the glory goes to God.

Now, that doesn't mean that God wants us just to quit working, quit using our talents, or quit trying, quit planning, quit putting our best efforts forward and instead sit back and wait for every success to fall into our laps. What it does mean that while we faithfully work at something and put our best efforts forward, success and failure are in God's hands. The risen Christ is in control. We praise him for the successes he gives us in life. We pray to him and ask him to keep us from becoming discouraged when our best efforts are met with failure. In all that we do, we can have the absolute confidence that God will work all things for our good because the risen Christ is in control. Amen.