

**Easter People: Congregations Transformed**  
**First Christian Church**  
**Topeka Kansas**  
**April 18, 2010**

**Dr. Jim McCollough**  
Let's back up.

We have been sharing stories of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus each week since Easter ... listening to the testimonies of Matthew and John. But we left some of those 19 verses out of the reading this morning, but you need to hear them. John tells us the Disciples had made their way to the Sea of Tiberius ... that is where this story takes place. In the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel, the disciples are in Jerusalem ... remember the stories of being in this locked up room ... for fear of the Jews ... and Jesus came and met them there? Now ... we are in chapter 21 of the gospel and the disciples are back in their fishing boats! Where Jesus met them in the first place, remember? When we do reflections on a particular story in the Bible ... sometimes it is important to know ... where something is happening. This is one of those times. Look at this map. This is Jerusalem ... where the Disciples had their encounter with the risen Christ ... and subsequently gathered together in a room behind locked doors ... the story told in John 20 which we read last week. This is the Sea of Tiberius ... or the Sea of Galilee ... or Luke referred to it at one point as Lake Genesseret. It's all the same body of water. The point is though ... this Sea of Tiberius is 60 miles northeast of Jerusalem. These disciples ... had traveled 60 miles ... away from Jerusalem ... even after having those experiences with the risen Christ. They were moving away from the action ... it would seem. And the other thing I think is important to note is ... they were fishing for fish. This is one my favorite stories! I want to read a section of it to you that was not included in the reading a moment ago.

After giving the reader the geographical location of this story ... John shares this information:

**Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.**

**Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.**

**When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.**

When I read this story ... there are three things that just really stand out to me as being of major significance. One is ... the disciples had traveled 60 miles away from Jerusalem ... 60 miles away from where they had witnessed the crucifixion ... 60 miles away from where they had heard the women tell the story of what they had discovered that morning when they had made their way to the tomb. The Disciples had traveled 60 miles ... on foot! ... away from where they had heard the story of the Disciples who had met Jesus on the Damascus Road ... 60 miles away from where they had encountered Jesus in that locked up room. That long journey they had taken ... back to Galilee ... makes me wonder if they might have been just trying to give this Jesus thing ... up. You know what I mean? Give it up!

Have you ever had an experience like that? Where you made a huge investment in some cause. Maybe your investment was a huge amount of time ... a huge amount of energy ... a huge amount of money ... only to see it blow up and fly in your face? Broken dreams. Dr. J. Wallace Hamilton in his book "Horns and Halos in Human Nature". Tells the story of an auction..held in Washington D.C. by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office ... held back in 1926. The office was auctioning off one hundred and fifty thousand patent models of old inventions that had been declared obsolete...and put up for sale. People would laugh as things were put up, such as a bedbug buster...and an illuminated cat to scare away mice...there was a gadget ..which enabled a mother to churn the milk and rock the baby in one smooth operation... There was a device to prevent snoring...which consisted of a trumpet reaching from the mouth to the ear. One man invented a tube to reach from his mouth to his feet so his breath would keep his feet warm...while he slept. There was an adjustable pulpit auctioned off...too. And as it was brought on to the auction block....the auctioneer told how a preacher was preaching a forceful message on the subject...how will you send eternity...and when he pounded on the pulpit at one point...he apparently hit a button and the pulpit began to descend...right in front of his entire congregation. The auction was good for 150,000 laughs ... but everyone of those items represented a broken dream. Broken dreams are hard to deal with.

My sense is ... that was a big part of what was going on with those disciples of Jesus. They had gone home. They were back on the Lake ... fishing for fish. Fishing was their vocation ... before they met Jesus. The fishing industry was a huge part of the economy of that part of Palestine at that juncture in history.

The second thing that stands out to me when I read this story ... is the sheer tenacity of Jesus. He just

keeps going back to them ... following them ... determined to convince them ... to get at the mission to which he had called them in the first place. Consider this encounter. The disciples had been out on Tiberius all night long ... I can imagine they were exhausted ... when they heard the voice of a stranger standing on the shore ... telling them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. And they cast their net ... and it was so full of fish that they could hardly carry it in.

Now let me just pause and say ... to these disciples ... this would something like winning the lottery ... or making pile on an investment. That's why they came up on the shore and started counting their haul. John tells us they had caught 153 fish that morning! I try to imagine this scene. One, two, three ... and Jesus is standing there! Twenty one, twenty two, twenty three ... hey guys ... this is Jesus, risen from the dead! A hundred and forty four, a hundred and 45. And Jesus said ... "Come and have breakfast, boys." Tenacity. That's what you call Jesus' determination here. Sheer tenacity. Jesus is doggedly determined to stay with these disciples until they finally get a feel for what it is he is calling them to do.

Diana Butler Bass refers to this text in her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* ... saying ... "This New Testament reading is about the great catch of fish, whose very abundance threatens to sink the apostle's boat. And then she goes on to say ... "this is a metaphor ... for the church in general." And I would add ... for First Christian of Topeka ... in particular. There is abundance all around us. Just look at us! This church, I'm talking about! Abundance everywhere! We have a huge children and youth ministry ... 72 kids turned in camp reservations this past week ... that's abundance. We have some gorgeous new buildings ... that just flat out look classy! What can I say? But I also sense an abundance of the Spirit ... all around us.

This past week I was rummaging through a drawer in the chest of drawers in our bedroom ... and I came across the flier that was prepared by the Search Committee, prior to our moving to Topeka 20 years ago. So I paused ... sat down and read it. I had been asked to answer some specific questions by the Search Committee and to put them in print ... and much of what I had written was published in this flier that went out to the congregation prior to the vote. The things I wrote reminded me of some of the issues which the congregation was facing. There were a lot of trust issues ... some people thought the Cabinet was making too many decisions ... and that the Official Board needed to be meeting more often ... there were questions about Church administration ... governance ... and the role of the Senior Minister in the midst of all of that. All kinds of issues that I will refrain from listing ... but I couldn't help but think ... as I read through that stuff ... how far we have come. How our decision making process has become so much more spiritual discerning ... I guess what I am trying to say is ... this congregation has undergone transformation ... in so many ways. And we still

are! Our buildings are being built to fit a ministry plan ... and our ministry plan evolved out of a prayerful and spiritual process that ultimately engaged the entire congregation. I do believe this congregation is a great example of one which has undergone a lot of transformation. There have been and continue to be some really great things happening here. The point of all of this is to say ... as we catch on to the abundance of the Spirit ... an abundance of gifts ... our ongoing transformation ... involves risk and change and challenge and opportunity. And in the midst of it all ... I believe we have been faithful ... we have listened ... we are learning more and more every day about how to pray together ... our Elders now ... take at least 10 minutes every Thursday morning ... out of the time for their meeting ... to pray. We go around the room ... and each person offers prayers ... prayers of thanksgiving ... prayers for things that are going on in the church ... prayers for health and healing. You know what? That would not have happened 10 years ago ... It wouldn't have happened 5 or even 2 years ago. There's a transformation going on here. This church has learned to take on controversial issues and work through them prayerfully ... and come out stronger as a result of the process. We have weathered storms and have proven as a church ... and we have continued to laugh together ... and cry together ... and commit together.

We ... like those disciples of Jesus on the shore that day ... have been confronted with an abundance that could sink our boat! The task of this congregation will be to prayerfully look to the future ... praying that God will show us new ways to open ourselves to our community ... and to share our gifts with a wider community. We have been told by our friends at Church Extension that we need to have 3 open houses of our new facilities. One ... for you folks, who are in the process of paying for all the new construction and renovation. When you see it all together, you are going to be very proud. Then we need to have an open house for the families of our Child Care Center ... and for the residents of First Apartments ... and then we need to have an open house ... just for our neighbors.

Perhaps the most important message in this story we heard this morning is ... that profound call of Jesus to Simon Peter. Three times Jesus asked Peter ... do you love me? Three times. One for each of the times Peter had denied him in a courtyard outside the palace of the high priest on the night before he was to die on the cross. And each time, Peter said ... Lord you know that I love you. And the response from Jesus was ... "Feed my sheep. Tend the Lambs. Tend the sheep." In other words ... get at being the church.

It didn't happen over night for those disciples. It wasn't one of those instantaneous experiences that called those disciples to their mission. They walked 60 miles to try to get away from the call. But Jesus wouldn't give up. And he still doesn't give up.

The abundance of those fish that morning on the Sea of Tiberius ... threatened to sink the disciple's boat. Abundance can do that.

I think the question we need to ask ourselves is not ... "Who are we?" but rather ... "What are we becoming?" How are we reaching out? Calling ... listening ... responsively acting?

People ask me every week ... when is it going to be finished. The building? Hopefully in about 3 weeks or so. The search committee? In a year or so. Our transition as a church? Never. If we are faithful to the gospel ... we will always be in a state of change. And when it feels like the dust has settled ... be careful. Be very careful. Because settled dust .. is the death knell of the church.

Let us meet the risen Christ ... let us eat together ... and then, let us move on to the church that is always in a state of change. Thanks be to God.

Amen.