

The Stranger on the Shore

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn now to John chapter 21. We're going to look this morning at verses 1 to 7, and then we'll follow that, God willing, this evening by looking at the following verses, down to verse 14.

After this, Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. So on down to verse 7, particularly today.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is as real now as it was when it happened. And it's a real event of significance now, as significant as it was when it took place all these years ago. It's a real event.

It's an important event. It's a significant event. And it remains real and significant in this world in which we live. Because it's a world, as you well know, marked by death, by pain, by despair, by loss of hope and vision.

[1 : 18] We're surrounded by these things in our world. Death by natural causes, so-called.

Sudden death. Sudden death. Sudden death. Sudden death. Sudden death. Tragic death. Multiple deaths. Death through violence. Death through war. Death through persecution.

Death through poverty. Death through starvation. Death through starvation. Death through starvation. Malnutrition. All sorts of ways by which this world is marked by death.

And we're not saying that to be morbid, but to be realistic. That is the kind of environment of world we live in. Maybe we're sheltered from it to a great extent.

Although death comes to us all eventually as homes, families, individuals. But there are places in the world today, if you lived there, places where people can't live in peace, are surrounded by violence, by war, by deprivation, by poverty, you would be very, very familiar with a world marked by death.

[2 : 31] And that's where the resurrection of Christ stands. And really, this passage emphasizes Jesus standing on the shore.

It's Jesus as he comes to stand over this world in all its lostness and in all its despair and in all its darkness and as it's marked so much by death.

We're brought to the figure of Jesus Christ and his resurrection because as you look at Jesus, the risen Jesus, standing here by the shore and coming to deal with these disciples as he dealt with them, what you find is that Jesus who stands over death, who stands above death, who presides over death, who has conquered death, and who brings through that a very real and a very lasting hope to all who trust in him.

It's not just that death is around us. When we look into our own souls, we find death there as well. We find as human beings that we, by ourselves and unaided by the grace of God, will tend to mock at such things as resurrection and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and a life that's lived with eternal gain by trusting in someone who was crucified and of whom the Bible says he rose from the dead on the third day.

That's why it's important here that today we're looking at this passage to do with Christ's resurrection and its relevance for your life, for my life, for the world in which we live, for the gospel message that we seek to bring to that world, for the way in which we seek to live as witnesses to Jesus.

[4 : 16] Because all of us here today, whether we're conscious of it really as we should be or not, and I'm sure none of us is as conscious of it or as frequently conscious of it as we should be, but all of us here, by our gathering here today, are bearing testimony to this great fact that Jesus lives, that death has been conquered, and that he stands majestic and triumphant over the death that we cannot conquer ourselves.

Let's look at this passage, and first of all look at what we'll call unsuccessful fishing, and then we'll look secondly at the risen Christ's intervention.

This unsuccessful fishing is such an interesting passage in many ways, and there are some details of it that we can't actually deal with today, though we'd like to go into it in more depth.

There are things that we will just focus on, because we're taking it really in a particular way. This unsuccessful fishing, it was rather strange that Peter actually here says, I'm going fishing.

Why is that strange? Because here were disciples, Peter included, who already had met with the Lord, who knew that Jesus was risen from the dead, and yet here they are, instead of going on their mission to bring the message of his resurrection to those around them, to those in Jerusalem or in Galilee or wherever else they might be, instead he's saying, I'm going fishing.

[5 : 46] What's happening here? Is he turning his back on Jesus? Is he saying, well there's no sign of this Jesus now, we met him a couple of times, other people have seen him, but he's not here now, so what are we going to do?

Let's just leave this. Let's just turn our back. Let's go back to what we once did. Let's just go fishing. It's not like that. It's not Jesus, it's not Peter saying, I don't want to actually be a disciple of Jesus anymore.

He's not losing his faith, as you might say. He's not actually turning away from being a follower of Jesus. But just think of his situation.

They're not yet ready to go and face the world with the message of Christ risen from the dead. They need to be taught something else. And indeed you'll find they only came really to be empowered and taught on the day of Pentecost as you read about it in Acts chapter 2.

So here they are, they're still weak. They're not sure of things. They still can't really get their head around the fact that Jesus is risen from the dead and their discipleship continues, but they're not really sure as to how these two things connect and how they're going to go out with the message of the gospel as he himself has said to them they would need to do.

[7 : 05] So meantime, Peter says, well, I'm going fishing. And of course, at a very basic level, they still had to eat. And they knew how to fish.

So even at that level, you might say it was a necessity for them just to go and get themselves some food. And this was the best way they knew to do it. But the thing is, the passage really tells us that what happened here was just to bring bring them further to know their own weakness, their own need of Christ's power, their own need that Jesus himself should actually equip them and empower them to go out with the gospel and that they just could not manage it in their own strength.

They could not manage it by themselves. Now let's just pause there. Are you or I still like that? Do you know the power of Jesus in your life?

Do you know the power of Jesus to the extent that you should know it in your life? I have to put that to myself as a minister of the gospel. I have to put that to myself as someone who preaches the gospel. Am I as aware as I should be of the presence of Christ, of the power of Christ?

Am I depending on myself? Is it my own ingenuity or skill, even if God has given me any of that? Is that what I'm depending on as I come to live my life, whether it's as a minister or whatever else it is you're doing?

[8 : 29] Are you going to face what you find in front of you now, whatever change it might be in your life? Are you beginning a career? Are you going to study somewhere? Are you following an occupation you've had for some time?

Are you thinking about something new in your life? How much is Jesus the base of that, the foundation of that? Does he actually feature, as he should, at the very center of things for you? Because what this passage is telling us is, here were disciples who needed to go out in a way of discipleship, in a way of mission for Jesus, who needed to go out into the world with the gospel, a huge task.

And Jesus was telling them, yes, I said to you, I would make you fishers of men, but you will not be able to do it in your own strength. It doesn't matter what you have or I have in your life today.

To benefit from it. To get spiritual success from it. Now this is through, not just individually, it's through for us as a congregation. It's through for us in the wider context as well.

[9 : 42] Whatever it is today we have in life, whatever it is we need to do, whatever it is we're facing up to, whatever task we're allotted, you need and I need and we need the power of Christ risen from the dead, the power of his resurrection to actually benefit from it.

It's one thing to be able to cope with things. It's one thing to be able to just put up with things and go along day by day. It's another thing to positively benefit from things.

It's another thing to gain from your experiences something which will really be invaluable and lasting for you for eternity. Because that's what we're made for.

And you need Christ and his power centrally, foundationally in your life for that. And then you read that they caught nothing.

They said to him, we will go with you. They went out and got into the boat but that night they caught nothing. Now just think about that. These were not unskilled fishermen. They'd fished there a lot.

[10:52] They knew how to fish. They knew how to catch fish. They knew the best places. They knew the best times. They knew the best conditions for fishing. They were highly skilled fishermen.

But all that night, which seems to have been the best time because that's generally, it seems when they were more likely to catch fish. All that night, they caught nothing.

You see, they're being taught. You have your skills. You have your knowledge. You have the know-how as to how to bring fish to be caught.

But that's not enough. It won't go far enough. They caught nothing. Now you think of how you apply that in your own life personally and my life personally, how we have to apply that to ourselves as a church or a congregation or the wider church in the day in which we live.

We've never had any time when more technology, more technique, more meetings have been available to us than we have nowadays.

[12:02] Just think of the number of conferences and seminars and how to do things, types of meetings that take place week by week throughout the church, throughout the world.

Please don't think that I'm decrying that. I'm not saying that we shouldn't have these things. I'm not saying that we don't need to plan. I'm not saying that it's not wise to actually have such meetings at all, that we can do without them.

That's not what we're saying. But what we're saying is, for all that we have all of these things, and for all that we have to some extent the know-how, perhaps more than ever before as to how to do evangelism and how to witness for Christ in a secular world or how to evangelize Islamic people or whatever it might be, how few converts you still see.

And how many of God's people, how many of those who come to church, not just here, but everywhere else, how many are really fully and wholeheartedly committed to serving Christ?

You see, the disciples, as we are, we're being taught. It's great to have your know-how.

[13:20] It's great to have the technique. It's great to have the knowledge. It's great to have the meetings. It's great to have the conferences. But what we need more than anything else, and above everything else, and before everything else, is to rely on the power of Jesus through prayer.

Now that sounds perhaps oversimplified. Maybe you and I think, or people in the world will suggest to you, well, yeah, that's okay, we know that, but there's no buts about it.

There is no substitute whatever for prayer and simple, direct sharing of the gospel. That's what these people in the days ahead came to do.

And they came to do it because they learned from Jesus through an incident such as this, that there simply was no other effective way of ministering the gospel, whatever techniques or know-how you might have and be able to use, good as they might be, without prayer and a simple sharing of the gospel and witness to Christ.

Don't expect the church to grow. Don't expect the gospel to be effective. Don't expect the church to have an impact in the world. Because that's really what this is saying to us.

[14:49] Fishing without reliance completely on the power of Jesus will be fruitless. However much it might involve toil.

We read similarly in Luke chapter 5. Unsuccessful fishing once again. They've toiled away all night the disciples and then Jesus says to him, cast out into the deep, let down your nets there.

And Peter said to him, same Peter as here, Master, we've toiled all night. We were there the previous night and we caught nothing. But at your word I will let down the net.

That's what makes all the difference. You're following the word of Jesus. You're being obedient to Jesus. You're following his direction. You're doing as he specifies. And then they were able to take in a huge catch.

And their nets were at breaking point. So unsuccessful fishing and all of that tells us. Are you relying today on your own strength?

[15:58] Are you trying to cope with the issues of life in your own strength? Are you saying, well I need a little bit of Jesus? Yes, I need God to help me along with what I can do myself.

No. You need him absolutely in everything. Without him, you can do nothing.

Oh, we can achieve a lot. We can do things without God, without Jesus, without Christ. Yes, we can point to things that we've managed to create and achieve in our lives.

But lastingly, spiritually, eternally, for the benefit of others spiritually? No. Without him, we cannot do it.

So that's the first thing. This unsuccessful fishing and what it teaches us as individuals and teaches us collectively too. But then you find the risen Christ's intervention.

[16:57] And in verse 4 there, it's very interesting and surely significant as well that it begins, verse 4 there, it says, Just as the day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore.

In other words, just at the appearance of dawn, they saw this figure on the horizon, just on the shoreline. Not that far away. We're reading it about 100 yards off, 100 meters, let's put it in these terms.

And just as the day was breaking, they were able to make out this figure. And they didn't know who it was. They still probably couldn't make him out, except that it was someone there on the shoreline. It was Jesus. They didn't know that. But just as the day was breaking, doesn't that really tell you something of spiritual significance as well? Because what Jesus was going to do to them, or for them, was to open up their mind, to open their understanding of how much they needed him and of how little they could do without him.

In other words, there's a dawning for them in terms of their knowledge as well. Things are beginning to progress for them. And light is beginning to dawn in their minds as to the significance of this person, and the power of this person, and their need of this person.

[18:10] It's only in your life and my life, as things begin to dawn in relation to Jesus, and what he means, and who he is, and what he can do for you. It's only as that begins to open up before you.

It's only as you see him and begin to see more of him, that your life really develops the way it should. Leave him in the darkness, and you're on your own.

But as the day dawns, as more of Jesus appears, as you begin to see him more clear, and what that really means is that as you commit your life to him, you're committing your life to learning more about him, to getting a better view of him, to understanding how he fits into your experiences, how he fits into the world in which you live, the things that you face, the situations and the conditions that meet you, the trials in life, that inevitably come your way from time to time, you and I need a dawning of the day for all of these, more of this Jesus to appear to us, and for us to make more of him.

And so, as the day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore. That word stand is surely important as well.

It's not just saying, well, yes, he was standing on the shore. Of course, that's literally true. But standing in this sense in the Bible very often means standing prominently, or standing in charge of something.

[19:46] And really, that's what you've got here. Jesus is in charge of the situation, because he's the risen Jesus. He's already risen from the dead. He's on the other side of the resurrection and of death.

And so he comes to take charge of this situation for them. But if you compare it to Luke chapter 5, I think I've put a question, and it's in the form of a question in your notes.

What is the big difference that you notice between what you find in that passage in Luke chapter 5 and the very similar event here?

Well, you might say there are a number of differences, and there are. But the big difference for our present purposes is that in Luke chapter 5, Jesus is in the boat with them. Here, he's at a distance from the shore.

But it doesn't make any difference to his ability. And what Jesus was teaching them here was the power that you had with you when you caught the fish long time back before I died, when I was with you in the boat, when you were so afraid, when you saw the miraculous power that I have, that power has not gone now that I've died and risen from the dead.

[21:03] It's still my power and still for you and for your benefit. But it's actually even better because he's no longer going to be present with them physically in the boat.

He's going to be present in a wonderful, mysterious way from heaven through his spirit. That's what he taught them. You read John's Gospel here, chapters 14, 15, and 16.

He talks about sending another comforter or helper to them. And that was the Holy Spirit, another person of the Godhead in the wonderful mystery of God and who he is.

And so Jesus is really saying to them, I'm not going to be present with you physically. I won't be in the boat with you in the things of life. You won't be able to touch me physically or turn to me and look on me physically as you did when I was with you in the boat.

But I'm still here for you. I'm still in charge of your lives. I'm still in charge of what's happening. I still have the same power. I've got the power now that's been demonstrated through my victory over death.

[22 : 08] And it's for you as you live out your lives in fishing as my disciples. Now there's another question, isn't there?

How much do you know? How much do I know of the presence of this Christ? You can't see him with your eyes. You can't reach out and touch him physically with your hand.

Whoever it is that's beside you, just think right now. Is Jesus as real to you as that person beside you in the chair?

Is he? He should be. If he's our Savior, then he is. Because he lives in our hearts.

Because he comes alongside us spiritually. Because he speaks to us through his word and we speak to him in prayer. Is he as real to you today as the person beside you?

[23 : 14] And if not, why not? Shouldn't he be? Isn't that what it's all about? To be a Christian.

And then he says to them, cast the net on 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 of the quantity of fish.

Now he put a question to them first of all. It's translated here, children, do you have any fish? It's difficult to translate it really because he spoke to them in a kind of ordinary way. It's something, if you wanted the equivalent of it nowadays, it would be something like, lads or guys, you haven't caught any fish, have you?

That's really how he put it. Guys, you haven't caught any fish, have you? He was expecting the answer, no, because he knew they hadn't. So they answered, no. And you know, there's a point that strikes me now just as I think about that, which I think is also significant.

Here's the risen Jesus. Jesus, this great figure, this dynamic, majestic figure who stands over death, who's risen from the dead, and yet when he comes to speak to these people, he speaks in their language.

[24 : 31] He comes alongside them, really, to assure them that, I understand your situation. And I'm putting myself, really, right where you are.

Guys, you haven't caught anything, have you? Jesus speaking in an ordinary way, to ordinary people, so that he can help them in the things of life.

You don't want a God who's distant. You don't have a God who's distant. A God who just keeps his own respectable distance from people's lives. Who lives in an isolated splendor, in a palace in heaven, and just looks down on earth from time to time.

You have a God who has dirtied his hands. Who speaks respectfully. Who came into this world. Who lived as a human being. Who suffered. Who knows loss. Who knows temptation. Who knows pain. Who died. Who rose from the dead.

[25 : 35] And who comes alongside his people. And sympathizes and helps them. That's the God. That's the Jesus. That you need and that I need.

That's the Jesus offered to us in the gospel. That's the Jesus we cannot really live in a proper way without. And they caught this huge catch. And he's teaching them, as we said, he's teaching them reliance.

Reliance upon himself. But it's reliance, of course, when you rely upon Jesus. When you trust in him and rely upon him. Your reliance is attached to the power of Christ.

The ability of Christ. Why does it mention later on that they caught 153 fish? A lot of people have spent ages, hours thinking about that.

A lot of ink has been spilled and words have been written in regard to all kinds of fancy ideas about what the 153 fish represent. And when you plough through all the different ideas, you have to come to the conclusion that, well, if one of them is right, all the others are wrong.

[26 : 46] And how do you know which is right and which is wrong? Why does it mention it? Well, I think very simply for this reason. Don't try and really make something symbolical of it.

because it's attached to the words that are next to it there where it says, the net was full of fish, 153, and yet the net was not torn.

It's mentioning 153. They obviously counted them after they had landed them. And it's mentioned because it's demonstrating for all that there were 153 fish, that net was not broken.

And that itself was amazing because normally that amount, as you read in Luke chapter 5, would begin to break the net. It would begin to tear the net and you would lose the fish. And what John is really capturing for us there is the fact that when God blesses and when God blesses in response to his people's need, it doesn't matter what means God has given us.

If you take the net there to represent the different means that God has given to us in the gospel, the means are not going to be broken by the amount of blessing. In other words, however God blesses you, don't be afraid you'll not be able to cope with it.

[28 : 10] He gives you the ability. Your life will not break. It'll be enriched, but it'll not be broken. But it raises a few more questions. Are we afraid of catching a large catch?

Are we afraid of fullness of blessing? Are we satisfied with a minimum? Are we so used to minimums that we're kind of afraid of thinking about maximums?

God coming in a richness of blessing and instead of a few fish here and there, fill our nets to bulging point? are you afraid today that you need more than prayer and the word of God and obedience to him?

are you afraid of the consequences of committing your life to Jesus? Or if you've already done that, are you afraid of committing your life to more fully?

To receive more blessing? To be of more use for him? To be a more effective witness for him in the world? If you're afraid, and sometimes I'm afraid too, look to the stranger on the shore, look to who he is, look to where he stands, look to what he can do, listen to what he says, and go and do it.

[29 : 50] Do it because that's the only way by which you will know the richness, the fullness of blessing from the risen Christ.

Let's pray. Lord our God, you know that we at times struggle within ourselves and that we find ourselves all too often, O Lord, so weak and incapable of dealing with the issues of life, of death, of temptation, of trial.

We confess before you that we so often fail and fail in our understanding and in our ability. We thank you today that you have reminded us and taught us of your ability, of the way in which you never fail.

Lord, we pray that you would help us more fully to trust in you, to be committed to you more than we are, and to rely upon you totally for your power to be effective in our lives, in our lives individually and collectively and as a people.

Hear our prayer, Lord, accept our worship and cleanse us from our sin. For Jesus' sake, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.