

## “Not finished yet”

Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-14 (May 1, 2022)

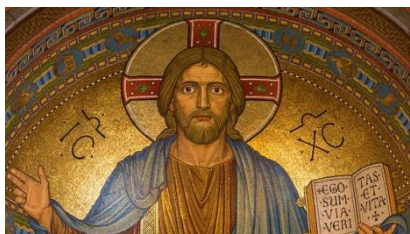
by Paul Matheson

Have you ever started a project that you never actually finished? In the evenings, Lindsay and I often go for a walk. There’s a house we pass in our neighbourhood. It appears they’re redoing the exterior.

But it’s been like that for about a year and a half! When they first started, they stripped the siding and the brick work. They put some new sheathing on a wall and covered it with plastic wrap. So far, so good! But that’s as far as it went. We thought for sure they’d finish it before winter. But no, it’s sat there, half-finished for all this time.



We wonder what has happened: Did the owners run out of money, or time, or energy, or interest? Were they doing it by themselves? Did they have a contractor who went bust? It’s all just speculation. Who knows when things will change? Or *if* they will? We’re watching. But for now, it’s a project that’s not yet finished.



Easter may be that sort of project too. It *does* go on, you know. Notice that in our service today we’re still singing resurrection hymns and reading, in our scriptures, of Easter appearances.

The gospel writer, John, tells us this is the *third* time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. Apparently, once was not enough. There was more to be done. Not that the resurrection was incomplete. But the effect it had on the disciples’ lives – that was only just beginning! (Well, it’s *still* going on, isn’t it?)

The scene opens with Peter announcing to a group of friends that he’s going fishing. And they say, “We’ll go too.”

Was this some kind of vacation idea, or what? “Let’s go fishing. Because things have been pretty intense with all that’s happened, and maybe we need a break. Some time on the water. Want to come along?”

Or was it *more* than that? Remember that Jesus had called Peter *away* from fishing, to fish for people. Is Peter giving up on that? Does he think his life with Jesus is over?



Peter finds his creaky old boat, and pushes out from shore with nets and fishing gear. Out onto the water, where once this group of fishermen had worked so hard to eke out a living. They fished through the night. Casting the nets, pulling them in. Nothing there. Casting them again. My guess is they didn't say very much. It all came by rote, those familiar actions learned long ago, repeated. Still nothing.



Does life sometimes feel like that to you? Long, dark, laborious, futile? Going through motions but finding little satisfaction? Wondering what the point is? It was a most unsatisfying fishing trip. Which makes us ask again: Why are they even out there? Why do people give up on things?



I've been wondering this week why people drop out of church? Or why, after years of trying to make it work, they end up abandoning their faith. There seem to be as many answers to those questions as the individuals who ask them. Everything from dissatisfaction with organized religion, to heart-breaking disillusionment when life goes awry, to radical doubt in God's very existence.

There are all kinds of reasons, and maybe you've considered some of them yourself. I wouldn't be surprised! In this time and place it's not easy to stick with our faith. There are days I struggle with that myself. So why are you here? Why haven't you given up?



There's a voice in our reading. It comes to the disciples early in the morning, wafting out over the water from a lone figure standing on the beach and calling to them.



“Have you caught anything?” the voice inquires. “No,” answer the disciples, discouraged by their long night of futility. “Not a thing.”

Who is this anyway, asking such intrusive questions? What business is it of *his*, we wonder. Why should he care? If I were those disciples I might be rather annoyed. The mysterious stranger offers some unsolicited advice. “Cast your net on the right hand side. You'll find some fish.”

OK, Mr. Know-it-all. What makes you the expert? But if you say ... They cast the net. Do you know what happens next? Have you heard this story before? It should evoke a familiar memory.

They follow the instruction, plop their net on the other side. Pull. Pull again. Harder. The net is full of fish! And I don't mean two or three, I mean 153. The water roils, the glint of silver scales flashing in the breaking sun.



The disciples in the boat spring to life. They grasp the rope and pull for all they're worth. They barely *budge* the net!

And that's the bright moment of recognition. When the disciple Jesus loved (the unnamed disciple who was maybe closer to Jesus than anyone else) leans over and whispers into Peter's ear: "It is the Lord!"

A miraculous catch of fish. A gift of abundant grace. An unexpected presence signalling the arrival of newness.



When Peter heard it, he threw on his cloak (an odd detail, when you think about it, but I suppose he wanted to be decent) and jumped over the gunnel into the water. He swam for shore. Swam for all he was worth, as hard and fast as he could go!

What a display of over-the-top enthusiasm! What a change from the discouragement of a broken disciple. Here is a man on a mission! No more vacation time, diddling in the sea. Peter knew where he had to be. More than anywhere else in the world, he wanted to be with Jesus. So he jumped, and he swam.

Where would you like to be? On a cruise somewhere? Off with your friends and buddies? Killing time? Peter didn't even have to think about it. Because he was head-over-heels in *love* with Jesus. And to have the pleasure of just one moment with his Lord .... He couldn't wait for the clumsy boat to drag its load to shore.



Are you in love with Jesus? Does that language sound natural or strange to you? Is faith about obeying rules, maintaining an institution, believing correctly, working diligently? Maybe, partly, some or all those things. But first and foremost, faith is about *relationship*. Connection. Love. Everything flows from that.

This basic spiritual need is common to all humanity: to be in loving communion with the One who made us. It's what inspired Peter's leap into the sea, his race toward the shore. It's what keeps us all searching, hoping, listening for that voice.

The French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, said there's an emptiness in every human heart that only God can fill.<sup>1</sup> As long as that *emptiness* remains, we can never be satisfied. Peter knows he needs to be with Jesus.



When he gets to shore, he finds that Jesus is preparing a meal for them. Which is another typically “Jesus” thing to do! “Why don’t you grab one of those fish you’ve caught and bring it over here?” says the Lord. “I’ll put it on the fire.”

So now the disciples gather, all of them, in a circle round those glowing charcoal embers. Jesus takes bread, warm and filling, and gives it to them. Takes fish, fresh off the grill, and shares it with his friends.

And once again it’s all so mysteriously familiar: Loaves and fishes. Hunger satisfied. Spirits fed. These are echoes of previous encounters. No one has to ask who this stranger is. Because they know it is the Lord.

And so this becomes a moment of renewal. Tired, discouraged, directionless disciples are recalled, renewed, re-commissioned for service in God’s kingdom.



I find it interesting that this happens in the same place where it began. There in Galilee, on a beach, with boats and nets and fishers. And now, at the end of the story, we come full circle. Those *once* called to be disciples, are re-called.

Apparently our calling is not a one time thing. As life circumstances change, and we find ourselves in a different place and different time, Jesus may well come to us *again* and issue his invitation.



In the verses that follow our Gospel reading, Jesus speaks specifically to Peter: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes Lord; you know that I love you.”

Can you hear the love language that is present in this exchange? It’s not a question of more faith or harder work, it’s a question of relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* VII(425)

Three times the questions and answers are repeated. Until finally, in exasperation, Peter protests, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” And Jesus, now sure of that, commissions him: “Peter, feed my sheep.” Peter’s calling will be to tend the flock of God.

This final exchange between Peter and Jesus is worth a whole other sermon. (Don’t worry, you’ll not get that today.) My point is simply to say that Peter is, once again, pressed into service. *He* thought his life with Jesus was finished. But it’s not!



How often have you thought your time with Jesus was done? Once, twice, more?

This Jesus is *persistent*, you know. He does not give up on us. As the implications of Easter continue to unfold in our lives and in the world around us, we may find that Jesus shows up a second, or even a third time, like in this reading. Or more!

He may catch us on vacation. Or wallowing in doubt. Or feeling guilty for our multiple denials and failures. (Remember that *other* charcoal fire, in the courtyard of the High Priest, where Peter flatly denied any relationship with Jesus at all?)



None of this will stop Jesus from calling you, reaching out to you. How *many* times might this happen? I don’t know the answer to that. But I do know how difficult it is to shake a risen Saviour.

Did you think that starting again would be impossible? Well, in God’s good Easter world that’s not the case at all.



Remember that house I told you about, the one that’s partly renovated, the one I see often on my nightly walk through our neighbourhood and wonder what will happen next? When I look out on our congregation, I see the *same* sort of thing. I see a work in progress, a people in the making. And I count myself among them.

I see us all with our faults and foibles. We have our doubts, our questions about the future, regrets about the past.

But I also hear a *voice*, calling to us from a far-off beach where breakfast is cooking. And I’m here to tell you that God isn’t finished with us yet.

Our lives are all a work in progress. A renovation half-complete. We ought not to be discouraged by that. Instead, we ought to listen and allow our love for Jesus to be renewed. After all, he’s still deeply and irrevocably in love with you! He wants nothing more than to pour out his grace and fill that empty place inside you with all that is good and nourishing and satisfying.

He still needs us to be his people. Because there's still a world of reconstruction ahead of us, a whole creation to be made new. And we're not there yet. I realize that may sound a little daunting. But we don't have to fix it all. Lord knows we *can't*.

We just need to love him, and love our neighbours, and be the people he's calling us to be. May it be so! Amen.