

“When Jesus Shows Up”
John 21:1-14

One summer during my seminary years, I worked for an ecumenical ministry group in Huttonsville, West Virginia. The purpose of that organization was to provide assistance to the poorest individuals of that county year-round, but during the summer the ministry focused on needed home repairs. Each week, a church youth group would come to help and my job was to take the teens and leaders to sites, introduce them to the residents and provide needed tools.

The minister who was my supervisor was perfect for the job. He loved the area and its people. He knew the needs of the county and had a knack for raising money, yet my relationship with him was uneasy from the start. The day I arrived at the Catholic retreat center where I was to stay for the summer, the staff had no idea I was coming even though the minister was to have made the arrangements. Once we began working together, he and I often seemed to disagree on the best course of action, too. He would end such conversations declaring, "Just do what I say."

About midway through the summer, a youth group from Pittsburgh arrived and during that week a girl mentioned to me in passing how much she respected my supervisor. Her church group had come there the previous summer thus she had seen the good he was accomplishing and spoke from a longer-term perspective than I had. Still, her comment caught me on a bad day and my frustration surfaced. So in response to her gracious words I began to name a few of my grievances with him. It was a terribly inappropriate thing to do, yet once I finished my litany of gripes the teenager calmly looked me in the eye and said, "I still think he's a fine man."

Her words stopped me in my verbal tracks and caused me to re-examine my work with that minister. She made me realize I didn't have the full picture and needed to get over myself. One might even say her direct words were a moment when Jesus showed up.

The Biblical text before us recalls a day when that happened in the most literal sense. John doesn't tell us how much time has passed between Easter morning and the day described in our text, but we do learn this is the third time the risen Christ appears to his followers. The first occasion had been on the evening of the day his tomb was found empty when Jesus came to ten of the disciples hiding behind locked doors, showed them the wounds on his body from the crucifixion, and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. Thomas was not present then and vowed not to believe the news unless he could put his hands in the wounds himself. The following Sunday, Christ appeared again and this time Thomas was present. That scene ended not only with a profession of faith from that one apostolic holdout, but words of blessing from Jesus for all those who believe even without seeing him. It is with those moments in mind that John writes "After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias,"

Simon Peter had announced to his fellow disciples "I am going fishing" and six others join him. The night of labor that follows results in no fish. Just after sunrise, Jesus appears on the shore, but as light is dim and he is some distance away they don't recognize him. "Children," he calls, "You have no fish have you?" He encourages them to cast their net on the other side and when they do, the net becomes so full they cannot haul the catch into the boat. It is then that one disciple realizes it is Jesus and when he shares that news Peter jumps in the water and swims toward land while they others remain in the boat, eventually bringing it and the catch ashore.

As they step onto the sand, they see a charcoal fire with fish grilling on it. Jesus invites them to bring some of the fish they have caught and the text says the net holds 153 scaled creatures. "Come and have breakfast," Jesus says. John adds that "none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord." Jesus then feeds the men.

There are all kinds of ways we could faithfully respond to that scene. Some persons over the centuries have focused on how Peter's first recorded words after all of the drama of Easter, are to announce he is going fishing. The reactions range from those who suggest he is going back to his life as a fisherman to those who defend the choice as needed respite or simply the words of one who is hungry. Others have pointed to the fact that real food was being served at that breakfast, indicating that Jesus wasn't a spirit, but rather an fully embodied man again. Still others have gone to great lengths attempting to explain why John told us the exact number of fish those men caught. I found four theories including that it was reflective of how many types of fish the ancient Greeks thought existed and thus represents all creation or that it is the resulting number for various mathematical formulas. Any of those themes could make for interesting and faithful reflection, but it seems to me the key point is that Jesus showed up again.

Three different times in those fourteen verses, the gospel writer tells us that Jesus "revealed himself" or "appeared" to the disciples. The verb means to emerge from obscurity; a concrete revelation of the heavenly upon earth. The fact that John points out none of the men dared ask who he was suggests to me that there was still some of them unsure, but not about to say so. Instead, in the midst of their doing something quite ordinary, the risen Christ showed up. A turn of events that invites us to consider when he has done the same with us.

I'm not suggesting you have had a visual sighting of Jesus though certainly that is possible. Rather, I'm speaking of those moments when we are going about the everyday events of life and something happens that stops us in our tracks.

It could be an occasion when someone speaks just the word we need to hear—like that teenager from Pittsburgh did for me—that give us a message of correction or encouragement or hope they had no way of knowing we needed. It happens when we are thinking about someone who hasn't crossed our minds in years and that very day get a letter or email or call from them. It can occur when our defenses are at their lowest or our frustration is at its highest, too. One scholar noted "John chooses to tell a story that Jesus comes, precisely to disciples disappointed in their work." (Bruner, Frederick Dale *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans. 2012, p. 1208) Perhaps that is when he appeared for you as well.

To my way of thinking it isn't a question of whether or not Jesus still shows up, but have we recognized it as such when it occurred. I can't prescribe exactly how and when such events happen. Nor can I give you a three-step process for discerning whether it is the risen Christ who has appeared or not. Still, I'd like to suggest that just as seven disciples knew who their host was at a breakfast long ago even without asking, so will there be times we just know.

As part of a recent Board of Trustees meeting of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the room was divided up into small groups of five. Included at my table was the President of the Seminary, two other trustees, and a staff member I had not previously met. The facilitator asked each of us to tell the story of how we had come to the Seminary and why we stayed. All of the accounts that followed were inspiring, but one, in particular stood out.

It came from the staff member who had been part of the school for two years. She had previously worked for another non-profit in Louisville that due to reduced funding during the pandemic faced a significant budget shortfall. The leadership decided that every team in the organization whether composed of 25 people or three had to lay-off one. She was the supervisor of two others and her boss said she would have to decide which of the two would lose their job.

In recounting that moment she said to us, "I did something that was unusual for me as I told my boss that I needed to pray about it first and let him know my decision. I did that and the next day came to him and announced that I would be the one to lose her job." My amazement at

that choice grew exponentially when someone at the table asked “Aren’t you a single mother?” She nodded her head as she finished the story. “It was the next week, that I got a phone call from the Seminary asking if I would be interested in applying for this job. I am so blessed”

On this day, I invite you to start pondering moments like that in your own journey; times when you heard or saw something so profound that you were filled with awe and wonder. Start paying attention to events in a new way as you move forward as well. I’ll be interested in hearing what you discover as my guess is when you have encounters like that, you, too, won’t have to ask if it is Jesus who appeared, because like those who preceded us in the faith, you’ll know.