

“Belief Into Faith” – Jn 21:1-19 – Easter 3

“I’m going fishing!” “Me too!” “I’m in!”

Hardly the words you might expect from a grieving gang. Hardly the words you might expect from a group of people who had recently seen their leader executed as a common criminal. Hardly the words you might expect from that same group who had so recently encountered that same leader risen again from the dead.

“I’m going fishing!” “Me too!” “I’m in!” But these are the words spoken by that very gang as they gathered on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, so how can we understand their actions? How can we resolve this problem. Problem? Certainly! This is worse even than a minister playing golf – on a Sunday, no less! Not that I have any evidence of any ministers playing golf on a Sunday – since I don’t play myself I don’t really know who does, or especially when. There are probably better examples of actions that would cause the righteous to gasp in shocked surprise, but maybe it’s best not to give you any ideas!

What I’m trying to say is that this scene from John’s gospel opens with a stunning surprise problem, and for the most part we miss it. The problem? Here are the disciples of Jesus, apparently not too long after his death and resurrection, doing something very, very ordinary – working. Falling back upon their vocations they had left just a few short but exciting years ago. They had left Jerusalem, most likely fleeing for their lives. After all, the last we saw of them was when they were huddled together in fear in the room they used in Jerusalem, terrified that they would be next on the list of religious troublemakers to be arrested and executed. To be sure, Jesus appeared among them in that room, twice even, and they along with Thomas, came to believe that he had indeed risen from death. But soon after they had “gotten out of Dodge City” as the saying goes, and headed back to their old familiar stomping grounds along the shore.

Boredom must surely have flooded into their lives to replace the mind-boggling heady excitement of the days when they walked with Jesus. We can easily picture how after they had escaped from the city, and made their way to safety in the country, how they would have gathered together, day after day, and reminisced about what had happened. But I think we can picture also how the excited exchanges of memories of the first days, the “remember when he said ...” statements that would trigger another round of choruses of “yeah, and when he did such and such ...”, if not another round of wine, faded into scenes where the responses were shorter, more like nods and grunts, as the stories and the memories started to get a bit old, a bit stale. How eventually the boredom set in – after all, you can only tell the same old stories so often among the same old gang (although I’ve known some “same old gangs” who are still telling the same stories after many decades!)

In any event, it is easy enough to imagine how at some point one of them, in this case Peter, good old Peter who always seemed to act first and think last, speaks up – “I’m going fishing!” Now to be sure, this was not a statement of intent to engage in some recreation or sport, to pick up a fly rod and try for a reluctant trout or suspicious salmon – this was more like “I’m going back to work”. Back to the ‘secular’ career they had left to follow the stranger who had with a simple, “Follow me” had changed their lives. They had followed him, and had come to believe that he was someone really special. They had come to believe in his power to heal the sick, to cure the lepers, to make the cripples walk and the blind to see. They had come to believe that his power was enough to bring him back from the tomb of death. But in the aftermath of all that had happened they apparently had also come to believe that it was over, that it was time to go back to work.

And so they did – go back to work, that is. Seven of them (how perfect is that?!) climbed into a boat and headed out. Whose boat? I know, I know, I always ask the most unusual questions, or perhaps I simply articulate the most common of questions that nobody else admits to asking. But that

was one of my questions – whose boat? Was it theirs? Were they right back in their old harbour? Had they even been preparing the boat for another season on the water, already drifting into the mindset of going back to their old occupation? In any event, the boat was there, and ready, and it was either theirs or the owner didn't mind them using it, because all seven of them jumped into the boat and headed out to their favourite fishing grounds.

But it wasn't quite like the 'good old days', and it seems like they had lost their touch. All night they drifted, but as dawn broke over the waters it became readily apparent that not only did they not have a good catch, they didn't have any fish at all in their nets! And just as happens even today when you've been totally skunked, some smart-aleck comes along, and asks, "how's fishing?", and proceeds to offer all kinds of advice about how you should fish in your very own favourite spot! It was no different for the disciples, as some stranger stood on the beach and hollered the challenge at them. "You didn't catch anything, did you?" As much as any fisherman who hates to be totally honest, they had to admit that no, they hadn't. And as sure as any heckler on the dock or in the next boat will offer advice, the stranger tells them to let their nets down on the other side of the boat. What is really miraculous in this story is that they did! Instead of arguing, they followed his advice – how unusual is that?! But it worked, and instantly their net was so full they couldn't haul it back in.

And that was the moment of recognition, as the disciple whom Jesus loved was the first to know it was their risen Lord. (Talk about questions! I can never read that phrase – the disciple whom Jesus loved – without asking myself what it means. It seems unlikely that it implies that Jesus didn't love the other disciples, so there had to be some reason John highlights the special relationship between Jesus and this unnamed disciple whom he loved in a way that was, to John at least, special.) But the important thing is that they recognized Jesus, and reacted. Peter, in his characteristic 'me first' approach, even jumped out of the boat in his eagerness, and the reunion breakfast was on. Grilled fish was the main course, but with strong reminiscences of the days of the hungry assembled crowds, bread was added, and they were satisfied, and knew it was their risen Lord.

They might have suspected at that moment that life was once again changing for them, but it was the next incident with Peter that sealed it. Peter, who as foretold had three times denied his Lord, now is given three opportunities to redeem himself. Three times Jesus asks him, "do you love me", and three times Peter replies, "Lord, you know that I do", and Jesus then issues the command that will change Peter's life, and the lives of the disciples, forever – "follow me". Those words propel the disciples from belief into faith, changing them and their lives for all time. Until now they had believed, now they were being called to live out their faith.

"What's the difference between belief and faith?", you might ask. I think there is a huge difference, and we see it in the disciples, and we see it in ourselves.

The disciples believed. They knew that Jesus had the power of God at work in him – they had even seen it with their very own eyes. They believed that he was the Son of God, but it was "head knowledge", a state of mind, a passive understanding. Here, in that encounter on the beach, their "head knowledge" belief became a passionate faith of the heart. Here they finally understood that they were indeed being called not just into belief that Jesus had risen from the dead, but they were being called into a life of living out that belief, into a life of action, of faith.

That for me at least is the difference between belief and faith. I draw a distinction between belief and faith, in which belief is of the head, and where faith is of the heart. I characterize belief as a state of mind, a passive knowing, even understanding, in contrast to faith as a lifestyle, an active doing, a putting belief into practice, if you will.

All of us are faced with the same transition from belief into faith that the disciples encountered on that shoreline. We begin with belief, with hearing about, even proclaiming the saving action of God

in Jesus Christ. We profess our belief in the words of the Apostles' Creed, which takes the name 'Creed' from the first word in the Latin version: 'credo', which translates 'I believe'. But in our belief the risen Christ keeps calling to us as he did to the disciples, "follow me", and as we put our belief in him into the practice of faith we do follow him, down the dusty pathways, encountering the poor, the ill, the outcasts, the sinners, the deaf and dumb and blind and tending them like the sheep of His flock. Feed the hungry, comfort the grieving, visit the lonely, house the homeless, love the unlovable – these are all ways in which our belief becomes transformed into faith through loving actions.

We've got a great start here at Central in doing just that – putting our belief in God's redemption in Christ into faithful action: we can still smell traces of the food served at the community breakfast; we can see the leftovers from the sandwich ministry in the fridge; I can bear witness to sitting down to eat with old and new friends in the Yak 'n Snak yesterday; many if not most of you offer food, water, shelter and Christ's love to people as near as Canada and as far away as North Korea through your offerings to Presbyterian World Service and Development (more commonly known by its short form PWS&D) and to Presbyterians Sharing (more commonly known by its short form Presbyterians Sharing).

However, we need to continue to expand the ways in which we implement our belief as faith. You know we keep struggling to find ways to expand our International Student Ministry, to begin the First Nations Ministry Project, and to develop the other exciting plans. This is also the year we can focus on turning belief into faith through deliberate reaching out into our neighbourhood, personally introducing ourselves to our neighbours and inviting them to discover and experience here the same sense of safety, of acceptance by God and people alike, of meaning, of redemption and reconciliation that we both enjoy and celebrate.

"Follow me", Jesus said, and we hear him, and we respond to him following him on the journey from belief into faith. Thanks be to God that Christ calls us to follow, leads us in the way, walks beside us on that journey, and is there behind us as well not only to push but to pick us up when we stumble, as we in turn move from belief into faith.