

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Easter  
April 10, 2016

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Today's account of a Resurrection appearance of Our Lord is the last we get at Mass until Ascension Day. Saint John probably planned to end his gospel account *before* he added this incident. We can say that because the end of Chapter 20 is such a beautiful place to stop. That is where it says, "But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that believing, ye may have Life in His Name." The whole motive for writing his gospel is summed up right there.

Yet the work of the Risen Christ was *beginning*, not ending! *The Acts of the Apostles* attests to this very thing. Saint Luke says his account is the record of "all that Jesus *began* to do and teach." You and I do not worship a dead Christ but a Living Lord. His activity from Easter morning to Ascension Day in Year 33AD is the  *tiniest fraction* of all He actually accomplishes in the souls of men throughout history. You and I are part of the evidence! St John must have understood this. He lived to see the Church spread far and wide and growing rapidly. From that perspective St John saw the need to indicate the principles of the Lord's continued activity in His Church. Above all, there needed to be some official account of Simon Peter's restoration to primacy. These topics form the subject matter of what John added to his gospel account. So if you want to think of John Chapter 21 as an epilogue you would be right.

The Lord's continuing activity in His Church is indicated in the opening scene. The disciples are at work. Simon Peter had already reassumed his leadership. He announced he is going fishing, and the others followed Peter's lead. But notice, as the incident opens, these men are working at their *own* initiative and pleasure. Many of these men were professional fishermen. And nighttime is the best time to fish. But they caught nothing. This is a sign from the very earliest days of the Church that when the apostles (or anyone else) are self-willed, they are just ordinary in terms of success or failure. A self-willed Church will go nowhere.

But look how different things are when the work, even the *same* work, is done at the command of the Lord Jesus! St John gives us a scene we can love (and not just if you are a morning person, like the beach, and breakfast is your favorite meal!) Revisit the moment with me. It is just daybreak, and the fishermen see a figure

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standing on the beach, but in the dim light cannot tell who he is. So the Risen Lord calls across the water casually so as not to identify Himself. “Have you caught anything?” It’s a question you could ask from the fish pier at Chatham or the seawall on the Merrimac River at Newburyport. “Have you caught anything?” And the answer was “No.” So in a friendly tone the man on the shore suggests, “Cast your net on the right side of the ship.” And their nets suddenly fill with fish.

It was the Beloved Disciple who put it all together. He is the one who had made something of the way the empty grave clothes had collapsed in the empty tomb. It says of him then, “He saw and believed.” It was a leap of faith. We might say he connected the dots. Now again, with the nets suddenly full of fish, the Beloved Disciple does it again. He says, “It is the Lord.” I hope your goose bumps are working! I have been loving this incident all my life and can still feel the excitement and wonder of that instant when the Beloved Disciple, in the boat, and in the dim light of daybreak, says, “It is the Lord!” This is one of the delicious moments in the Bible.

It is also a reminder when we work in obedience to Christ’s command (even though we may not recognize Christ or that the command is His) what is done always has its own reward. This reward may or may not be success in a worldly practical way (like a net full of fish). But working in obedience to Christ’s will always brings us into closer harmony with the Divine order of things, and always to our benefit.

You don’t have to make much of the number of fish caught, 153. The number might simply mean that is how many fish were caught! But the fact the net did not break *is* significant. Our Heavenly Father always desires to give us more than we are able to receive. Yet our poor needy souls are never broken by what we can take in of His love and revelation.

Having obeyed the Master’s direction, and been reunited with Him on the shore, the disciples then benefit from His sustenance. *He feeds them.* Here is that principle of the Lord’s continued activity in His Church, continuing to this very day. Those whose work is self-willed and self-motivated are likely to come to

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nothing. But in obedience to Christ's command good things happen. And the Lord Jesus sustains with refreshment those who obey Him. And just like on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the refreshment is partly a fruit of our own work. But it is always His gift to us!