

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Easter  
May 5, 2019  
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There is the story that in a seminary preaching class, the professor remarked his student had given a fine sermon, but that he had missed three great places to stop! Reading St John's Gospel you get the impression that the evangelist planned to end his account before adding the incidents we have in today's gospel at Mass. The whole motive for writing the gospel was beautifully summed up in Chapter 20:31. "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." Isn't that a wonderful place to finish? Except St John didn't!

The fact is the work of the Risen Christ was not ended; it was only beginning. *The Acts of the Apostles* declares this up front, describing itself as "all that Jesus *began* both to do and teach." The activity of the Lord as described from Easter Day to Ascension Day is a tiny fraction of all He actually accomplishes in the souls of men and women throughout history.

There is another story describing a seminary "Mass class." Instruction is offered soon-to-be ordained men to practice saying Mass. A retired bishop was the instructor. And when one student got a bit confused after reading the gospel and declared "Here ends the gospel" the old bishop roared, "Young man, *the gospel never ends!*"

St John wrote his gospel account at the end of the First Century. By then the Church had spread far and wide and was growing rapidly. St John had witnessed the Passion, Death, and Risen Christ. So he had the retrospect and saw the developing large picture. St John recognized that to complete his gospel account he needed to indicate the principles of the Lord's *continued activity* in His Church. There were a few other things that needed documentation, such as an official account of Simon Peter's restoration to primacy. Chapter 21 of his gospel contains these things. You would not be wrong to consider John Chapter 21 as an *epilogue*.

The principle of the Lord's continual activity in His Church is indicated in the opening scene. The disciples are at work. But it is work at their own initiative and pleasure. Simon Peter had already reassumed his leadership and said he was going off to fish. The others joined him. Many of these men were professional fishermen

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and nighttime is the best time to fish. But they caught nothing. This is a sign at the very start of the Church that when the apostles, or anyone else, is self-willed, they are just ordinary in terms of success or failure. Such a church would go nowhere. But look how things are different when the work, *even the same work*, is done at the Lord's command! It is just daybreak, and the fishermen saw a figure standing on the beach. In the dawn light they could not tell who this is. Over the water, He called out casually to them so as not to identify Himself. "Have you caught anything?" *No*. In a friendly tone the Lord then says, "Cast the net on the right side of the ship." And their nets suddenly filled with fish.

It is the Beloved Disciple (the very one "who saw and believed" at the empty tomb) who now says, "It is the Lord." Nearly 70 years after first hearing this part of the passage I can still feel the excited wonder of that wonderful moment: The Beloved Disciples, in the boat, in the dim light of daybreak, saying, "It is the Lord."

When we work in obedience to Christ's command, even though we may not recognize Christ, or the command as His, what is done always has its own rewards. This may include success in a worldly practical way, such as a net full of fish. But sometimes there may be no success. Still, working in obedience to Christ's will always bring us into close harmony with the Divine order of things. Doing that will always be to our benefit.

When the disciples had obeyed the Lord's command, and all was safely ashore, Jesus Himself fed them. Here is the principle of the Lord's continued activity in His Church, right down to our own day. Those whose work is self-willed and self-motivated, are likely to come to nothing. But in obedience to Christ's command, good things happen. Christ sustains those who obey Him with a refreshment that is partly the result of our own work. But it is always His gift to us.