

Third Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2022  
“No Turning Back” (John 21:1-19)

After Susan and I got married and graduated from ASU, we built a house on family land in Claremont and started our family. We believed that we would live there until the day we died. However, God had a different plan for us – one we could never have fathomed at that point. During those years that I commuted back and forth to seminary, the changes generated by God’s new plan for me were felt by all members of our family, but there was still a sense of security in that we remained in Claremont, still in touch with what had become familiar.

But the change this new plan would bring became most impactful on a July morning in 1996. Susan and I stood in the living room of the house that had been our home for more than ten years, but it seemed so unfamiliar, so distant. The house was bare. All our belongings had been emptied out the day before and were in transit to Rockwell. Susan and I had come there one last time – just the two of us – to bring closure to a chapter in our lives. Both of us, in our own way, were saying goodbye to what had been our lives up to that point.

We were leaving behind the house we had built together with all its fond memories, the backyard where our kids had played and grown, and the community where I had spent my whole life, surrounded by family and friends. Everything that had become so familiar, so comfortable, so secure, would soon be a memory that I would recall only when feeling nostalgic. As we embraced, I said, *Well, there’s no turning back now.* The butterflies in my stomach validated that statement.

Four years of seminary and separation were over. We had waited for this day with anticipation, but now, all too quickly, it was here. I had received a call to St. James and it was now time for my family and me to sail into an ocean of new possibilities, new challenges, new responsibilities, a new way of life. As excited as we were, this change was difficult.

And we experienced this again in 2013 when, this time, we packed up our belongings and moved to Taylorsville. Having been entrenched in the Rockwell community for 17 years, it had become home for us as much as Claremont had been. We were leaving behind a church family we loved, friends we had made, two of our children, and a comfortable and predictable way of life. Again, as excited as we were about coming to Taylorsville, the change was difficult. Change always is because it upsets the status quo. With change, nothing can ever be the same again.

I’m sure you all can relate. When you resettle into a new community or move into a new house, everything changes. When you take a new job or move to a new school, everything changes. When you lose a special person to the grave, everything changes. Events such as these remove us from the security of that routine path we like to travel so well – for we all love an even-keeled life. A few moments of excitement and adventure are great, but basically, we want things calm, predictable, and normal. No draining decisions to make. No challenges to take. Just the peace-filled days of our normal routine.

Peter and the other disciples of Jesus were no different. They, too, sought what was comfortable. The past three years of their lives had been a whirlwind affair when we consider the quiet from whence they came. A good number of them were raised near water and had learned patience from it. From the comfort of that environment, they had earned their living. It had become their livelihood. But those years of traveling with Jesus – which had so abruptly ended in Jerusalem – had left them dazed and confused. Their lives seemed to be unmanageable, out of control. And now, when their time with Jesus appeared to be over, it was time to go back: back to the nets, back to the fishing hole, back to what was comfortable and predictable. They wanted control over their lives once again.

So Peter suggested they go fishing. As those of you who are fishermen know, fishing would offer the disciples the chance to relax and get away from all they had recently experienced. It would provide them a time to return to the old flow of life, a time to forget. But they soon found out that things had changed and that there was no going back. These men were veteran fishermen. They knew where the best fishing spots were and they knew how to bring in a load of fish. But John tells us that night long, their nets remained empty. They caught nothing! The old way of life which had brought so much peace, comfort and security did not work any more.

Just after daybreak, Jesus – whom the disciples didn't recognize – called to them from the shore. *Have you caught no fish?* When the response came back, *No*, he said, *Cast your nets on the other side of the boat and you will find some.* Perhaps they thought the suggestion was absurd. They had fished these waters for many years. If they hadn't caught anything all night, there was little chance they would do so now. Or perhaps they remember their last great catch, one that happened through unconventional methods. In any case, the disciples did as directed and the nets became so full they could not be hauled in.

At that moment, they realized it was Jesus. Simon Peter jumped out of the boat immediately and swam to shore, while the others brought the boat, dragging the fish-filled net with them. When they went ashore, they saw there a charcoal fire with fish on it, along with bread. Jesus then issued them an invitation: *Come and have breakfast.* When they were seated around the fire, he served them fish and bread.

So, what can we draw from this scene on the beach? We see, first of all, that the empty net was a sign that they could not forget the events of the past three years and simply return to what they had left. They couldn't return because of Christ's resurrection. The appearance of the risen Jesus there on the shore had brought a new definition that was now interfering with their old perspectives. They wanted the safety of their normal ways, but there he was bringing them back to what they wanted left in the past; bringing them back to a life of wandering, straining, and witnessing to the gospel revealed through him. Jesus was gently reminding them that they were partners with him; partners in sharing the good news of what God had done through him, partners in witnessing to the rest of the world.

Because of their encounter with him, things had now changed. There was no turning back. The life they had left three years earlier, they were now leaving again – this time for good. These men had been encountered by the Son of God. They had been transformed by his love and grace.

They had experienced his compassion and forgiveness. This was something they could not keep to themselves. They wanted and needed to share it with others and this is what they were now being called to do. Because of Christ and his life-saving gospel, everything had changed.

But they were not alone in the midst of this change. That's the second thing we take away from this scene. In that breakfast on the beach, Jesus showed them that God is present in the most basic things of life. And as there are few things more basic than our need for food and companionship, the risen Christ provided both. Taking the position of a waiter, he served them fish and bread, fulfilling their need for food. And as part of their community, he offered them friendship. He was assuring them as they faced the challenge of evangelism in the world that, relying on him, their needs would be more than adequately met.

So it is with you and me. We, too, have recently been confronted by the Easter gospel and have been transformed by it. Yet, as we return to the world and get caught up in the ordinary, day-to-day events of our lives, the signs of the resurrection are not as clear as on Easter Sunday. They can even become lost in the busyness of things. But the gospel won't allow us to return to the old ways and old views. Each time we encounter the gospel, we are cast into the *new* and the *old* becomes like the first house we lived in: interesting, alluring, but never the same. As hard as Susan and I might try to return to our homes in Claremont or Rockwell, we can never go back. The people, the times, even the smells are different. We are barred from that time forever.

The disciples couldn't go back either. Christ's appearances in Galilee and the transformation that had taken place in their lives since knowing him would not allow them. Neither can we. When Christ touches our lives and we are transformed from the experience, we, too, need to share it.

Look at what happened to Paul in today's first lesson. When he was encountered by the living Christ on the Damascus road, his life was completely transformed. Once a feared persecutor of first-century Christians, that meeting changed him forever. He couldn't go back to the old ways. Instead, he became the greatest missionary the world has ever known. That's what the gospel does. It grabs us and never lets us go. We want it to shine in our lives.

But as Paul discovered, we find that the world is hostile to the gospel. We determine that there is too much work in evangelism and too little reward. Or, perhaps, we simply don't know how to share our faith. Like the disciples, we attempt to drop out of the picture, only to find ourselves pulled in again. We run from the gospel only to run into it again. There is no way to escape it. It will always meet us when we least expect it, especially when we feel there is no more hope, much like the disciples felt after the crucifixion.

Sure, we can try to return to our self-created safety zones, but we can't hold on to safety very long. Sooner or later, the old ways will fail and we will be left empty and exposed. We might place our security in our jobs, only to have them taken away. We might place our trust in friends, only to have them betray us or move away. We might place our security in our money, only to discover that it won't last and won't buy happiness. Eventually, we'll be thrown headfirst into the gospel's grasp once more, and come to realize that it is the only thing that can sustain us.

And the gospel message will be the same for us as it was for the disciples. Christ is always with us, loving us, caring for us, meeting our every need, and equipping us for mission. And as we respond to the gospel's call to be partners in witnessing for Christ in the world, that is the same message we will share with others: *Christ is with you always and, after encountering his love, grace and mercy through the gospel, nothing will ever be the same again.* Indeed, there is no turning back. Thanks be to God! Amen.