Book 12

Sunday, April 10, 1983

"HOLY MACKEREL"

John 21:1-14

What does the church do, and what do we as individuals do, after Easter? Peter said, "I am going fishing," and six other disciples went with him. They had experienced the risen Christ, but were not sure what it meant or what to do about it. It was an "after-Easter slump," much like what happens in the church today.

Then to further confuse the disciples, during the first several days and weeks following Easter, Jesus would appear to them and then disappear. They never knew when or how or where to expect him. He was with them, yet not with them. He had not given them any plan of organization. There had been no long or short range planning. No committee or group had been appointed to draw up goals and objectives. No market analysis had been done to determine if the good news of the resurrection was something the world needed or wanted to hear. The disciples were not even sure if they were supposed to tell anyone what had happened.

The high points in our lives come, and we are not always sure what to do with them or what to do after they have gone. We have our high points, and they are often followed by our low points. After every victory, there is a "let-down." Haven't you felt that way?

I'm certain there was a kind of disappointment that set in among the disciples after Easter. They had, in a sense, deserted Christ right before Easter -- had left him to stand alone in his arrest, trial, suffering, and crucifixion. Then came the experience of Easter, and he appeared to them. They knew they were forgiven. But they still didn't know what to do.

So Peter, with six other disciples, decided to go fishing. At least they could fill the time with what they knew how to do best. There is a kind of therapy in work -- in doing routine tasks, in doing what we know how to do. But even that didn't work this time for these seven. The Gospel of John reports that they

fished all night and caught nothing. Perhaps they were now thinking that, not only were they failures as disciples, but also as fishermen. Sometimes we get the feeling that we can't do anything right.

And then that morning, it was almost like another Easter. A voice called to them from the shore, "Have you any fish?" And they answered dejectedly, "No!" Then the stranger shouted to them, "Cast your nets on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." I'm no fisherman, but I suppose that if one has been fishing all night with no success, the last thing one wants to hear is advice from a stranger on the shore line.

But to the disciples' credit, they cast their net on the right side of the boat, and the net was now so filled with fish, it was almost impossible to haul it in. Then they knew that it was none other than their beloved leader who had given them these instructions. Peter put it into words, "It is the Lord!" And he was so excited that he jumped into the sea and swam ashore while the others followed in the boat, bringing the fish.

When they all arrived on shore, Jesus prepared breakfast for them by broiling some of the fish. Now they all knew it was the Lord. And so the fish became the element of an unexpected informal communion service. It was like the last supper, only it was a first breakfast. The fish became Holy fish, or Holy Mackerel.

What does such a story have to say to us today as we gather the Sunday after Easter for Holy Communion?

1. It says, first of all, that after every high point in our life, after an Easter experience, there often follows a low point, a let-down, an after-Easter slump. It's part of the rhythm of life and the religious life, as well.

2. But note secondly, the story shows us that Christ is with us in the low times, as well as in the high times. When the seven disciples are at the lowest point in their despair -- not only has the experience of the resurrection worn off, but they cannot even catch any fish -- at this point Jesus appears on the shore, and once they begin following his suggestion,

their net is filled with fish. Everything changes!

More than that, when they get to shore, they experience his presence in the breaking of bread, in the act of eating together. Their spirits are renewed.

Sometimes in the low points of our religious lives, all we can do is go about our work and wait. In fact, in the other Gospels' accounts of what happened after Easter, Jesus gave his disciples only one instruction, "Wait!" He was saying, "If you wait with patience, then after a brief time, it will all begin to fall into place and make sense, and you will know what to do."

It's good advice. When an overwhelming experience or surprising change comes into our lives and we aren't sure what it means, then wait! Take time to sort it out. Don't act on it too soon.

Now obviously, not all waiting is good. Some people try to escape life by waiting and never doing anything. They expect everything to be brought to them, and they expend no effort. Others put off action and never accomplish anything, and that's not the kind of waiting Jesus was talking about.

Real waiting is expectant waiting. It is feeling and knowing one's self to be involved in the outcome. It is based on trust in God. It is our rest amid the unrest and confusion of the anxious world around us. "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31)

"Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage: yea, wait for the Lord." (Psalm 27:14)

This morning, as the disciples met Jesus in a post-Easter breakfast, we also meet him in this simple act of eating and drinking together. Amen.