

ON THE BEACH - PETER'S STORY (John 21:1-19 NRSV)



This is the story of a resurrection....Oh not the big one. Mine, actually. Although it has its foundation in the big one, the one we were there to witness, to see the risen Jesus. At the time we were so incredulous, so joyful. Here was our Master and friend, back with us in physical form so that we could touch his wounds, but changed so that he could come and go mysteriously. But his coming back reminded me of terrible things, things that filled me with a shame that, despite the wonder of the occasion, gnawed at me and wouldn't go away.

About three weeks after his rising I couldn't stand myself any longer. We hadn't seen him for about eight days, and I just needed to run away from it all, back to the familiar. I thought if I could lose myself in some hard physical labour I would regain some control, feel better about myself. So I went back to what I knew best - fishing. A few others opted to go with me, and seven of us launched out into the Tiberian sea at dusk, sure of a good catch. But it was not to be so. By dawn we had caught nothing.

So much for being in control. I was feeling even more frustrated.

Just as the sun crested the horizon, I saw a man on the beach. I didn't pay much attention to him, but he called to us, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" I should have recognised that way of speaking, of calling us 'children', but I was so immersed in my self-pity that it passed me by.

"No." we called.

"Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." was his answer.

'What a waste of time.' I thought. 'Anyway, what would he know?' But the others argued that nothing we had done had worked, so why not give it a go. So we followed his instructions, and the next thing we knew, we had a boat full of fish. In fact we had to take great care in hauling in the nets to prevent them breaking.

It was John who recognised him. "It's the Lord!" he cried, and only then did I see him. I realised that I was naked, and, true to my impetuous self, hastily threw on some clothes, jumped into the sea to swim and wade ashore, leaving the others to bring the boat in. Jesus had already started a charcoal fire and was grilling fish on it. He also had some bread. He said, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." So I went back to the others to help them do just that.

What was I to make of it all? It brought back so many memories, so much joy, Like the time I offered him a few fish, quite sure that it was totally inadequate for the job of feeding a huge crowd. But he took my meagre offering, gave thanks, and set about doing just that.

But there was also so much grief, so much shame, and the smell of the charcoal fire reminded me of it all. It reminded me of that other charcoal fire, the one by which I tried to find warmth, only to succeed in revealing myself to others in the High Priest's courtyard, to be challenged, and to deny this man's love for me, and mine for him - not once, not twice, but three

times. There on the beach my heart yearned to be able to love him as he deserved, but my shame and guilt burned in my gut.

Why did he choose me in the first place? I, who spent my whole life confident that my brawn (well, he certainly didn't pick me for my brains) would be enough to get me through, to show my affection for him. I wanted to protect him, wield the sword, never leave his side, fight for him. But in the end I couldn't even let him love me by washing my feet, couldn't stay awake long enough to support him in his grief, and finally turned my back on him, leaving him to endure his torment without me. My self-loathing knew no bounds.

"Come and have breakfast." he called. The others gathered around the fire, shy at first, but eventually relaxed enough to engage in some light hearted banter. But I hung back a little, saying nothing. Sometimes Jesus looked in my direction and smiled at me, as if to say, "It's alright. I understand." But I couldn't be sure.

That is, until afterwards, when he took me aside and asked me, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" I thought of my friends who had so readily come fishing with me, perhaps to help dispel my demons. I knew they understood. But this man?.....More than anything I wanted this man's love, but so unsure of my own towards him.

So I said, "Yes, Lord: you know that I love you." (Oh how I wanted it to be true).

He then said, "Feed my lambs." I dimly remembered how he fed the five thousand with my meagre fare. A green shoot began to grow from my little seed of love in the dark earth of my heart, a seed I realised had always been there.

Again he said, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord. You know I love you." The green shoot struggled towards the sunlight before me.

"Tend my sheep."

Then a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

I felt hurt. I was just beginning to see my love emerge, but he didn't seem to see it or believe me.

"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

And then he said, "Feed my sheep."

It was then that I understood that he *did* understand, knew that he *did* know. He knew the frailty of my love, the poverty of my offerings. But that's what he had wanted all along. He didn't want just my brawn, he wanted *me*, the person I had hidden for so long, the heart I had denied him because I could only see my own faults and failings, and in my denial of him, I denied my own capacity to love. Three times I had denied him by that first charcoal fire, and three times he gave me the opportunity to tell him of my love by another charcoal fire. And suddenly all my shame and guilt was reduced to ashes in this new, resurrection fire on this beach, lovingly tended by my Lord in order to feed us - not just fish and bread, but his own deep love.

Jesus went on to tell me of the difficult journey I would take in following him, but I knew now that I would.....*could* follow him to the ends of the earth and beyond if necessary.

And time and time again I would find that my meagre offerings would suffice, always be received with love, and always be enough for him to work with.

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