

“These Things Were Written”

The Sixty-Third in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 20:30-21:14; Isaiah 44:1-8

Jesus was not only alive three days after being crucified, but he was now appearing to his disciples. And he was appearing to them in a resurrected body which was transformed into an imperishable body, no longer subject to human frailty, or even death. In allowing his disciples to see his wounds, then appearing to them in the Galilee, and then eating a meal with them, Jesus offered his disciples compelling proof that he had indeed done as he said he would do—conquer death and the grave and accomplish the salvation of all those given to him by the Father. As a new era in redemptive history dawns, Jesus is now equipping his disciples for that mission of which he had been speaking, and which will begin in a matter of weeks at Pentecost—to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

As we near the end of our series on the Gospel John, we move into the epilogue of the gospel in which John recounts some of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Jesus has already appeared to Mary Magdalene, and to a number of the other women devoted to Jesus from the early days of his ministry. Jesus also appeared to Cleopas and an unnamed disciple as they traveled along the road to the village of Emmaus. Then Jesus appeared to Peter (although the details of this encounter are not revealed). Finally, Jesus appeared to a number of his disciples who had gathered together on the evening of the first day of the week (Easter) to recount how Jesus had appeared to many of their number and, no doubt, to share their collective joy and to discuss what all of this might mean.

With the doors locked for fear of the Jews—who were already spreading the rumor that the disciples had stolen Jesus’ body—Jesus suddenly appeared (he “materialized”) in their midst and pronounced his word of “Shalom” (his word of “peace” and forgiveness) upon his disciples. No doubt, the disciples were overjoyed. They had seen the empty tomb and the grave clothes, and yet Jesus’ body was nowhere to be found. They heard the testimony of the women that angels had appeared to them, and told them that Jesus is risen from the dead. The angels instructed the women to go and tell the disciples what the angels had told them. The empty tomb, the grave clothes, and the testimony of the woman was good as far as it goes. When Jesus appears among them that Easter evening, whatever doubts any among them were still harboring now became the certainty of sight.

Except for Thomas, one of the twelve, who will not believe until Jesus himself appears to Thomas and confirms that he is risen from the dead. According to John 20:25, Thomas tells the other disciples that *“unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”* As we saw last time, Jesus graciously grants Thomas’ request. *“Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”* Thomas’ confession is truly remarkable—perhaps, the clearest declaration of the deity of Jesus found in all the Bible. Thomas sees that Jesus is truly alive and makes the immediate and proper connection to the fact that a risen Jesus, must be God in human flesh. Even more remarkable, perhaps, is that Jesus accepts his confession.

Thomas’ confession of the deity of Jesus is truly the high point in John’s Gospel, and like the earlier

references to the true identity of Jesus, contains loud echoes from chapters 40-44 of Isaiah's prophecy, as, for example in Isaiah 44:6-8 (a portion of our Old Testament lesson) when YHWH declares, "*thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen. Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any."* If Jesus is God—since Jesus willingly accepts Thomas' confession and blesses him for making it—then Jesus is one with the speaker (YHWH) in Isaiah 44.

Jesus goes on to ask Thomas in verse 29. "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" Jesus pronounces a blessing upon Thomas who now truly believes, despite his reluctance to do so until he saw the risen Jesus for himself. But Jesus also pronounces his blessing upon all those who have believed without having seen, like Thomas has. Jesus is referring to people who will eventually believe the testimony of those disciples whose words about Jesus we encounter in the pages of the New Testament. Jesus will ascend to his Father, and not make any additional appearances to doubters and sceptics. Rather, we must believe in Jesus based upon the testimony of others who saw Jesus after he was raised from the dead. As Paul puts it in Romans 10:17, "*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*" The word of Christ comes to us through the testimony of those writings we now possess in the form of the canonical New Testament.

This brings us to our text this morning. We have come back to the theme of the opening sermon in this series on the Gospel of John when we first considered John 20:30-31, which is the summary statement for the entire gospel. "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" In context of the larger narrative, this summary statement grows directly out of Jesus' comment in verse 29. Those who have not seen the risen Christ (like Thomas) and yet believe (trust) in Jesus are blessed. The reason why John has written this Gospel is so that those who read or hear John's testimony about Jesus, likewise will believe, and therefore receive the blessing promised by Jesus—eternal life.¹

As Dr. Robert Godfrey once told me—there are two kinds of Ph.D. dissertations: the perfect dissertation and the finished dissertation. You get the sense from this summary statement (as well as from the concluding verses of the Gospel) that as John comes to the end of his account of the messianic mission of Jesus (which ends with his ascension) he needs to wrap things up. It is all-too clear that there are many, many, more things which Jesus said and did which John could have included—but his account would become way too long and unwieldy. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, John does include those things in this Gospel which give sufficient testimony so that all who read this book, or who hear it proclaimed, are summoned to believe in Jesus just as Thomas was. If you accept the testimony of those who did see and hear Jesus do and say the things written in this Gospel, and then trust in Jesus, and you will be granted eternal life in his name. John is offering both a summary statement of his Gospel, while at the same time, making a direct challenge to the reader/hearer of this Gospel.

This then, is the reason why John writes his Gospel, so that like Thomas, *you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.* The issue "who is Jesus?" is now firmly settled. John has told us in many ways who Jesus is. Jesus' miracles, his "I Am" sayings, his self-identification as "Son of Man," together

¹ Carson, The Gospel of John, 660-661.

with his post-resurrection appearances has given us convincing proofs that Jesus is God in human flesh. This is John's purpose in writing, and this is John's call to anyone reading and hearing these words. Jesus is the Christ, and the Son of God. Can there be any doubt?

Many question why, apparently, after ending his account in verses 30-31 of chapter 20, John includes the material found chapter 21 (the epilogue), which seems sort of tacked on to the end of the Gospel. There are a number of reasons why this may be the case. As we will see next time, it is abundantly clear from verses 15-23 of chapter 21, that Peter remains the leader of the apostolic church, and that he is commissioned directly by Jesus to preach the gospel (even after Peter denied knowing Jesus). If John composed this gospel at some point after the fall of Jerusalem in A. D. 70, then most of his readers would know of Peter's death in Rome at the hands of Nero during in the 60's of the first century.

Although he informs us that some have misunderstood what Jesus tells Peter, John's account in chapter 21 also explains Jesus' prediction that Peter will be put to death, and that the martyrdom of the chief apostle is part of God's purpose in ensuring the spread of the gospel.² The theme of the 21st chapter is that Lord of his church is preparing the disciples for Pentecost, just weeks away, when the promised comforter (the Holy Spirit) will be poured out on the people of God. This fact makes chapter 21 integral to the rest of John's account, and not a mere appendage.

As we turn to the opening verse of John's final chapter, the scene changes from Jerusalem back to Galilee, where Jesus' ministry first began. John does not tell us how much time has elapsed since the events of chapter twenty, before Jesus begins appearing to the disciples in Galilee. Most commentators surmise that this occurs a short time after the end of the Feast of Unleaven Bread, which followed the Passover (and was often considered part of the Passover celebration). John does not say if the disciples left Jerusalem as a group, or as individuals, but with Jesus' messianic mission now at an end, they begin to return to the lives and work they knew before Jesus called them to "follow him." They will soon learn that Jesus is not yet finished with them.

In verse 1, of chapter 21, John tells us, "*after this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way.*" The designation "Sea of Tiberias" is interesting because this the Roman name for the Sea of Galilee, which is a strong indication that John is writing after the Fall of Jerusalem during a period of Roman domination seen in things such as Roman place names replacing traditional Jewish names. Jesus reveals himself (i.e., made himself known) to his disciples in the same glorified and resurrected body they had seen in the locked room in Jerusalem. There are seven disciples named. "*Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together.*" Nathanael hasn't been mentioned since the first chapter, while the sons of Zebedee are John and James. John is still reluctant to use his own name. Peter and James have already been martyred (when John writes his Gospel), and two others are not identified. But the principle disciples (the inner circle—Peter, James, and John) are present when Jesus appears.

According to verse 3, after learning of Jesus' resurrection, the disciples seem determined to get back to what they were doing before they began following Jesus. "*Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.'*" Some critical scholars take the disciples' return to fishing as a sign the disciples had already rejected Jesus' call to go and preach the gospel—which is why, they say, Jesus must appear again in Galilee and re-commission them. But it makes far more sense that

² Carson, The Gospel of John, 667.

Jesus instructed his disciples to return to Galilee and wait for him, as we read in Mark 14:28, when Jesus says to Peter, “*after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.*” After the events of Jesus’ death and resurrection, with both the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened bread now over, it made sense for the disciples to return home, visit their families, and while waiting for additional instructions from the Jesus, return to their vocations. The reason why they returned to fishing might be as simple as the fact that Peter liked to fish, or that the disciples were hungry and needed something to eat.

John recounts that the disciples were not very successful in their efforts. “*They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*” Apparently, since they followed Jesus, their collective fishing skills have diminished greatly. Some commentators have wondered whether or not John is making a theological point here—the disciples are not successful in their efforts to fish, because apart from Jesus, they can do nothing. Here they are, fishing in the darkness (a metaphor used by John for unbelief) and they are unsuccessful in their endeavors. I would not make too much of this—since there is no direct evidence that this is the case. But it is an interesting point, if this is what John is doing—pointing us to a deeper truth than found on the surface.

The time has come for Jesus to appear to them in Galilee. According to verse 4, “*just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.*” As the light begins to dawn, so too Jesus now appears (if the light/dark unsuccessful fishing imagery is John’s point—this takes on a symbolic meaning). As in the account we read from Luke 24:16, we do not know if Jesus prevented the disciples from recognizing him, or if in the dim light of dawn, the disciples could not make out who it was that was standing on the shore speaking to them one hundred yards distant.

In any case, Jesus speaks to them first. “*Jesus said to them, ‘Children, do you have any fish?’*” Jesus speaks to them affectionately using the term *paidia* (“children”), which, in this instance, means something like the modern “boys” or “lads.” A paraphrase might give us something like, “dudes, you got any fish?” Jesus’ greeting is friendly, if not fatherly. The disciples answer Jesus from their boat. “*No.*” Still, they do not recognize Jesus, nor are they expecting him to be the one onshore asking whether or not their efforts were successful.

So Jesus instructs them, “*‘Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish.*” This immediately harkens us back to the account in Luke 5:2-11, just as it should cause the disciples to remember an earlier event in their time with Jesus.

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, 2 and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. 4 And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” 5 And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” 6 And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. 7 They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” 9 For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be

catching men.” 11 And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

Suddenly, it all clicks for John, who, no doubt, now remembered this earlier incident reported by Luke, and then makes the connection between Jesus’ original call for these men to follow him and become his disciples, with Jesus’ statement that after his resurrection he would go ahead of them to Galilee. In verse 7, we read, “*that disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’*” John not only beat Peter to the tomb, he was the first to recognize that it was Jesus speaking to them!

As we would expect, “*when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.*” Peter puts on his tunic and impulsively jumps into the water and swims to shore. That Peter would put on his tunic and then jump in the water (when people usually do the opposite), is yet another indication that this is an eyewitness account. In his zeal to get to Jesus, Peter leaves the others behind to haul in the huge load of fish which were right where Jesus said they would be. As we read in verse 8, “*the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.*” That the narrator is in the boat is yet another indication that the author is an eyewitness. John also remembers that Peter did not help the rest of them get the boat to shore.

The disciples will now enjoy a breakfast meal which Jesus himself has already prepared for them, and which he will now serve to them. “*When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’*” Although Jesus is now risen from the dead, has a glorified resurrected body, he nevertheless serves his disciples breakfast—men who have been fishing for much of the night without success and who were no doubt tired and hungry. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.

Peter, perhaps sporting a guilty conscience, got back into the boat and finished up the job of emptying the net. “*So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn.*” Peter was obviously a strong, tough man, able to haul in a large net full of fish unaided. People often seize on odd or incidental bits of information found in the Bible and then run wild with speculation. This is one such place where much mischief has been done. There has been much discussion of the meaning behind the fact that there were 153 fish in the disciples’ net. The church father, Jerome, ties this to Ezekiel 47, and the vision of living water coming from the temple. Jerome had heard that there were 153 species of fish, and thought this miracle was therefore emblematic of the future mission of the church which draws all men and women into the kingdom of God. Some have tried to figure out how the number 153 point to various letters of the Hebrew/Greek alphabet (Gematria) so as to determine the place where “gospel” fishermen are to spread their nets. Augustine went so far as to argue the number 153 is the triangular number of seventeen, so that it symbolizes the “ten” commandments and the seven-fold Spirit of God.³ OK . . .

All the number says to me is that John was there when the fish were counted and he recalled the precise number. His point is something like, “can you believe how many fish there were—153 of them—when Jesus directed us to that precise spot after we had fished all night elsewhere and caught nothing?”⁴

³ Carson, The Gospel of John, 672-73.

⁴ Carson, The Gospel of John, 672-73.

John's point is that the harvest that morning was huge and that the net was not even torn as it had been in the account of the previous incident mentioned by Luke. Because numbers are often used symbolically, does not mean that every number which appears in the Bible must be symbolic of something else. About the only symbolism which really applies here is when Jesus first called his disciples, Mark tells us, "*Jesus said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.'*" And lest we forget, the fishing metaphor is as much about judgment as it is evangelism. After all, what happens to the poor fish swimming around minding its business when suddenly it is caught in a net and yanked from the water to face certain death and likely to become a meal for the one who catches it?

The way in which John recalls this incident, seems to indicate that the disciples really did not know what to do when they saw that Jesus had prepared a meal for them. They have no categories for this. Dead men do not rise from the dead. But Jesus did. Human bodies do not pass through walls, but Jesus' did. People do not move from Jerusalem to the Galilee as easily Jesus did. So, when Jesus offers them a meal which he has prepared, they do not know how to respond when Jesus invites them, "*Come and have breakfast.*" As John tells us, by now they all knew that it was Jesus. "*Now none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord.*" This was all so new and strange to them. The whole fundamental character of redemptive history has changed—from things which Jesus promised to do, to things he has done in fulfillment of his promises. We can understand why the disciples might have trouble accepting the fact the one who was raised from the dead, is now serving them breakfast.

More importantly, Jesus likely ate this meal with them. John tells us in verse 13, "*Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*" Although John does not tell us that Jesus ate with them on this occasion, it is implied. We do know that when Jesus appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem, that he did eat fish with his disciples. According to Luke 24:41–43 "*while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.*" Of course, Jesus did not need to eat—the resurrection body does not require nourishment. But Jesus did eat fish to reassure his disciples that he was truly and physically raised from the dead. On this occasion, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee Jesus and his disciples enjoyed a fellowship meal together, pointing ahead to one important aspect of the Lord's Supper—that it is a fellowship meal which the risen Jesus serves us, indeed, give us himself.

Finally, John finds it important to tell us that this was the third time Jesus appeared to them. Some of those who deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus contend that it was more likely that people were hallucinating than Jesus actually came back to life. Well, if the disciples were hallucinating, it happened at least three times to multiple people at the same time! The lengths to which skeptics and unbelievers will go to evade the evidential force of Jesus' bodily resurrection always amazes me. They will deny both the fact of the empty tomb (observed by multiple eye-witnesses including the Roman soldiers guarding the tomb), and Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, in which Jesus appears to many, including over 500 at one time—(cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-8). The only reason why people choose not to believe is not a lack of evidence, but sinful prejudice against the evidence.

John's point in recalling this appearance of Jesus in Galilee is that during the days between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension, Jesus is preparing his disciples for Pentecost by appearing to them and showing himself alive. And as John has told us, these things too, were written so that "*you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*"