

“What Are You Hauling?”

John 21:1-19

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A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

MUMC, Thomasville, NC

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What are you hauling? Sounds like a trucker on I-85 asking the question. “Hauling” in trucking language means moving something from point A to point B. When all goes well the result is good, beneficial, positive, and productive.

It is still the Easter season. When we review the events in John’s gospel up to this time we see that after Jesus rose from the dead he appeared to Mary Magdalene on Sunday morning. That Sunday evening he appeared to the disciples, but Thomas was not with them. Then a week later, he appeared to them again and made his personal appeal to Thomas. Our story in chapter 21 takes place some time after that, but we have no idea how long after.

Seven of the disciples were gathered together in one place. I believe the disciples were still confused about what they should be doing. They had no idea how they were to carry on their ministry after Jesus’ resurrection. Even though Jesus proved his resurrection to them, things were obviously so different that they didn’t know quite what to do.

What we encounter in today’s gospel lesson in John chapter 21 are the disciples returning to their fishing careers. They are approached by Jesus whom they do not recognize. He instructs them to throw their nets on the right side of the boat. What follows is a picture of them hauling a net full of fish, 153 fish in all, to the shore where Jesus awaits them. The net is almost breaking, but many strong hands and arms are working hard to haul the catch to the shore. The lake is point A, the shore is point B. The result will be a lot of “good eatin,” as we say here in the South.

You know, it’s almost as if the risen Lord on this occasion is exercising divine power to work miracles in a humorous manner. It’s as if Jesus is grinning and saying, “So you want to go back to your old comfort zone of fishing, do you? Well, I’ve got a surprise for you ...something exciting ...something miraculous is about to happen, but it will demand every ounce of strength you possess and all the helpers you can find to experience this miracle. You’ll enjoy the result, but you’ll need to haul as hard as you can! It’s just a gentle reminder

that my disciples should always expect the unexpected ...a reminder that my disciples should never seek to be too safe, or too comfortable, or too secure in their lives! If they do, I might send them on a miracle fishing expedition ...to haul in a miraculous catch in waters where they have not considered fishing before!”

We're still in the season of Easter ...a time when we focus on the appearances of the resurrected Lord to his followers. It's interesting to note in John's account of this lakeside appearance of the risen Christ that the disciples do not initially recognize Jesus in their midst. The gospel writer tells us that it wasn't until their catch was more than they could haul ...when it had reached miraculous proportions ...that the disciples recognized Jesus.

In a playful yet earnest manner, maybe Jesus is beginning to notice a few of us enjoying our comfort zones in the church and has started thinking, “I know exactly the kind of miracle they need to have their eyes more widely opened to my presence at this time in their lives! I know what they need ...they need a ‘haul’ ...a large catch of fish ...that will be so surprising, so exciting, so miraculous that when I greet them ...when I speak to them ...I will have their attention and they will recognize Me afresh!”

As we continue to journey together, you (the congregation) and we (the staff) will be hauling the Lord's goods that have potential miraculous proportions. In addition, there may be individuals here who are hauling a kind of potential miracle not known to anyone but themselves. It may have to do with some form of healing, or job promotion, or debt management, or reconciliation with an estranged loved one. Who knows what miraculous potential the net you're hauling may contain? Perhaps we're all hauling something in our lives today that is too big, or potentially too miraculous, for us to carry alone any more.

So what can we do? We can hear the Lord's voice, “Shalom, Ivan! Shalom, Rodney! Shalom, Memorial United Methodist Church! Peace be with you!” As we hear our name, we recognize Jesus in our midst again. And we are free to admit once again that we need the Lord's help, and the help of our sisters and brothers in Christ, with the task of hauling ...with moving the potential abundant blessings of our God from point A to point B. When we all pull together the end result is always something miraculous. And there will be something beautiful in it for you ...and something beautiful in it for me, too ...something as exciting as having a fish fry with the Lord on the beach! Can you not see us hanging out with Jesus ...and counting

the fish, all 153 of them ...and understanding that the number symbolizes completeness, fulfillment, and wholeness? I can picture that ...and what a beautiful scene it is!

What shall we make of this post-resurrection fishing expedition? It seems to reflect back to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry when he found some fishermen and said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Mark 1:17). This analogy represented Jesus' earthy description of the work he was calling them to do. They were fishermen; he called them to fish for people. These disciples had likely felt this was an apt description of their ministry with Jesus. People flocked around them like schools of fish in a feeding frenzy.

But what would be their job after the resurrection? They were confused with Jesus' off and on appearances. What were they to do without him? I believe this experience is an acted out parable, not unlike those of the Old Testament prophets. The message is that they were to continue to fish for people. And their post-resurrection catch would be larger than any they had during the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Let me add a brief word about the fish ...The catching of fish almost certainly symbolizes the catching of people for Christ. An early Christian theologian by the name of Jerome suggested that there were 153 fish because there were 153 different kinds of fish in the Sea of Tiberius. Therefore, the catch was a symbol that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for everybody, every kind of person in the world. In more recent years, a biblical scholar by the name of Raymond E. Brown says that the 153 fish signify the all-embracing character of the mission of the followers of Jesus. According to Brown, the unbroken net means that in spite of the inclusion of such a vast diversity of people, the community represented by these disciples is not torn by schismatic dynamics such as intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, exclusiveness, injustice, hatred, jealousy, or other equally evil and divisive attitudes or practices.

So what are the lessons from this story today? First, *there is a word of encouragement and hope for us*. It is simply this: God doesn't want us to escape from the opportunities or challenges that life presents. God wants us to face them, and when we do, God promises to be right there alongside us. The disciples wanted to retreat to fishing in the usual waters, but Jesus had bigger things in mind ...nothing short of a miracle. Sometimes the Lord comes to us and instructs us to do something different – to cast the net on the other side. Sometimes the Lord

calls us to fulfill responsibilities that will require challenges and changes. And then some miracles will follow.

Secondly, in this gospel lesson *Jesus confronts us with our need to trust and obey*. If only we will lower our nets into God's abundant and full provision, we will find ourselves overwhelmed with a catch of miraculous proportions, and we'll have to haul for all we're worth to move it from point A to point B so that all God's people might benefit.

But there is a third lesson: Let's remember that any haul is merely a means to a significant end, that is, *to recognize the risen Christ in our midst ...recognize that we are not alone*. Such recognition is always a profound experience of God's grace. We cannot have any success at this at all unless the Lord helps us. As we start the hauling of a potential miracle in earnest today, may we reaffirm that the Church, including Memorial, does not survive because of *our* strength. It has survived and it will continue to survive because of the one who strengthens us. In other words, no Jesus, no fish!

So, my friends, this is your charge: Keep hauling! Then listen to the invitation, "Come and have breakfast!" What a scene: the risen Lord, the King of the Universe, the *Alpha* and the *Omega*, sitting on the beach making breakfast! All who haul nets with potential miracle catches from the waters of the lake to the shore ...all who need help ...are fed by Christ. God chose to come among us, and even after the miracle of the resurrection, God still chooses to make us breakfast!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.