

John 21:1-14

1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. **2** Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. **3** Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. **4** Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. **5** Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." **6** He said to them, "Cast the net to 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 there were so many fish. **7** That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. **8** But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. **9** When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. **10** Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." **11** So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. **12** Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. **13** Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. **14** This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Holding Wonder Like a Cup

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Come Holy Spirit and enable us to worship You in Spirit and Truth, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight our Rock and our Redeemer.

For most of my adult life, I--like all of us who seek to know God fully-- have struggled to abide in Christ. One moment all seems well, the road ahead is clear, and my heart is unburdened. The next moment I find myself, like Dante, "in a gloomy wood, astray, gone from the direct path." How is that, I wonder?

Often times that's just it; I fail to wonder. The great Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, once prayed: "I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder. And You gave it to me." When regaining consciousness after a near fatal heart attack, Heschel did not feel despair; rather, he felt only gratitude to God for his life. "Take me, O Lord," he thought, "I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime." "So many miracles"! This from a man whose people suffered the worst genocide in history during the very lifetime for which he was so grateful. "So many miracles." That, my dear friends in Christ, is wonder.

I would like to talk to you this morning about wonder: reasons for wonder, the importance of wonder to the Christian life, some obstacles to wonder and how to cultivate wonder. The older I get the more I understand that one of the keys to encountering Jesus and abiding in Him is the cultivation of wonder. No one can experience true wonder and not be drawn closer to its source, and God is the only authentic source of wonder. I believe this is, in part, what Jesus meant when He said "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18:3 NIV) Often we think Jesus was talking about trust, and He was, but I think He was also talking about wonder. Children are full of both trust and wonder.

Yet, one may wonder over what reason there is for wonder. In a world where a gunman shoots 32 innocent people before shooting himself, in a world of terrorism, natural disasters, war, disease, and poverty what reason do we have for wonder?

In this Easter season, we have the same reasons for wonder as the disciples so long ago. The whole story of Jesus's life on earth, from Mary's Magnificent to Jesus's ascension, is a story of wonder, of WOW!, of Whoa!, and, while its most wondrous moment was the resurrection, the stone that was rolled away, the discarded grave clothes, the angelic messengers that proclaimed His resurrection in the same way they heralded his birth, there was and still is more wonder yet to come.

In today's Gospel lesson we see just such an example. We see the very first recorded instance of just what the death and resurrection of our Lord was all about: reconciliation and redemption, restoration and re-creation. This is the first example of Jesus restoring a broken, frail and fallen human to fellowship by reconciling that person to himself, the crucified and risen Christ. Peter's story on that beach is our story and it's wondrous.

I don't think we realize just how dark Peter's situation was, at least in his own mind. In Mark's account of the resurrection, our oldest record, the angel who told Mary Magdalene that Jesus had risen also told her to "go, tell his disciples and Peter." "His disciples AND Peter." Why the 'and'? Can any disciple who has denied so emphatically even knowing his master still be considered a disciple? Though he's still with them, Peter stands outside, his fellowship is broken. He must be restored. Can you imagine how Peter must have been feeling while Jesus lay in the tomb? "My last act," he must have been thinking, "was to deny him in his very presence when he most needed my affirmation. Oh, how easy it was in the light of day and the safety of friends to

proclaim, when he asked me who did I say he was, that he was the Christ, the Son of God. I told him the very night he was arrested that even if I had to die with him I would. What a fool.” Is it any wonder that Peter ran to the tomb?

Now imagine what he must have been thinking days after Jesus was risen. “How could He forgive me?” “How can he accept me back as a disciple?” “I don’t know but I’ve got to try.” “I missed my chance when he was talking to Thomas... I won’t miss it again. If only I get to see Him one more time.” Then John’s cry of wonder, because wonder is the natural respond to being the presence of Jesus, John’s cry of wonder goes up: “It is the Lord!” Is it any wonder Peter dove into the water.

This is truly one of the most beautiful and wondrous stories in all of Scripture. So much is the same, a continuation of Jesus’s ministry before His death: Jesus reminded them who he was by working a miracle very similar to the one He worked the day He called many them; [ad lib Luke 5] He reminded them who they were when he called them to be “fishers of men”; His chosen meal, bread and fish, was the same as it was when he fed the 5000 and he once again broke bread with them as he had done on the night in which he was betrayed.

But now Jesus demonstrates what all that had been about. Three times he asked Peter if he loved him, one for every denial, one for each day in the tomb. Three times Peter confessed his love. In essence Jesus tells Peter in reply: “You said you’d die with me, and you will, but not yet. First, feed my sheep.” Then, Jesus called him again the way he had at the start, with the

simple command: “Follow me.” Peter is once again a disciple. He is forgiven. The death and resurrection of Jesus began its redemptive and reconciling work in a broken and fallen world by re-calling and re-creating a broken and fallen friend. That day, the redemption work of Jesus was made manifest to Peter in a deeply personal way. Before, for a very brief moment that quickly faded, Peter had walked on water. After that morning on the beach and for the rest of his life he must have been walking on wonder.

So despite the fact that the world is still fallen and broken, there is still as much reason to wonder now as there was that day. Wonder is, itself, a form of worship, and, like all acts of worship, it is essential to Christian life and growth because it humbles us and nurtures the fruit of the Spirit within us. Wonder is generated by many things, but whenever we experience it, it always puts us in the presence of God and humbles us.

And, so, wonder is important to the Christian life because humility is important to the Christian life, it's vital. Just before they began their service, both Moses and Isaiah were deeply humbled. Sandal-less, Moses knelt before a burning bush. Isaiah, the “man of unclean lips,” cried “Woe to me!” Wonder generates humility and humility builds a servant heart. Again and again, Jesus told His disciples that if they would lead they should serve. To be of much use to God, we must humble ourselves and, like Peter running and diving to get to Jesus, return to Him. Wonder helps us do that.

Likewise, wonder helps the Spirit produce His fruit in our lives. Paul tells us in Galatians that the “fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” “The fruit of the Spirit is love.” Paul could have stopped right there, Fruit and is are both singular, after all. He didn’t say the fruits are.” But like in 1 Cor 13, Paul needed to describe love, and here he used some of the same words, patience, kindness. Just as the body of Christ is one but with many members, so the fruit of the Spirit is one with different names.

The natural response to wonder is to praise its Source. The Psalms, the prayer book of the Church, are filled with examples of this. “Praise befits the upright,” “I will praise you as long as I live,” O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.” Wonder begets praise, and praise begets thanksgiving. Our Psalm this morning begins with praise, “I will exalt you O Lord,” and it ends with thanksgiving, “O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.”

Praise and thanksgiving give rise to joy, the first of the other names for love on Paul’s list. David proclaims that “Weeping spends the night, but joy comes in the morning,” and “You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.” This is what wonder does. It takes the weeping and wailing of the night of Good Friday and turns into the wonder and joy of Easter morning. The joy and restoration and salvation David sings about are the same as that which Peter experienced that morning on the beach, and the same that each of us can experience when we approach God with expectant wonder.

And, likewise, joy brings peace. When have you ever felt joy and been anxious? Peace makes it easier to be patient, and patience makes it easier to be kind. Wonder can feed and nurture all of that. And when we don't cultivate wonder, the opposite can happen. We put up many road blocks to wonder, but three of the most common are worry, unforgiveness and discontentment. Wonder puts our focus and trust on the Creator. Worry puts our focus and trust on the creation. My good friend Jim Carter in Ohio gave me this idea recently when he told me we need to choose the Creator over His creation, and I told him I was going to steal it from him one day. Jesus asked "Who by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" Often times, we think we can. When we worry we are saying we are in control, we can fix things, we can make things happen. We trust the creation: ourselves, our inventions, natural cures, science, technology, other people, any and all of it. When we wonder we acknowledge that God is in control and we trust in the Creator.

When we worry we make a god of ourselves. We do the same when we don't forgive. We all know the story of the man who when forgiven his debt immediately went out to collect the debt owed him; we know the command the forgive 70 x 7; we know we are to be reconciled to our brother, but we far too often don't do it. When we don't forgive ourselves and others we are basically saying: "God, your Son's life may have been good enough for You to forgive me, but it's not good enough for me to forgive myself or for me to forgive my brother and especially not enough for me to forgive my enemy." How dare we! As Jesus taught us to pray, we should forgive as we are forgiven.

If we don't our hearts will harden, and a hardened heart is not a heart capable of experiencing wonder.

Nor is a heart filled with discontentment. When we are discontent we turn God's very blessings into curses. Instead of considering, like Paul, all things rubbish for "the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus," we often consider having the blessings of the creation that we would chose for ourselves ahead of the blessing God chooses for us in Christ.

When these three, worry, unforgiveness and discontent threaten to rob us of our wonder and joy, we're casting our nets on the wrong side of the boat. The solution is to cast them on the other side, the side where our nets come back filled with wonder. Just as wonder naturally prompts praise and produces thanksgiving, so praise and thanksgiving cultivate wonder. Even when we don't feel wonder, it is "indeed right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places offer thanks and praise to" our Lord. Our God inhabits praise and where He dwells wonder is to be found. So to, in worship and service we cultivate wonder. All this flows in both directions. Wonder produces humility which builds a servant heart, but service generates wonder as you witness and watch God's love at work in and through yourself and others.

These four, praise, thanksgiving, worship and service are the work horses for cultivating wonder in our lives. Wonder will in turn then energize and sustain those very processes that created it, but there is one final means to the cultivation of wonder I'd like to discuss, one that's not quite as obvious as its big brothers: Remembrance.

Our Psalm today tells us to “give thanks in holy remembrance.” In a few minutes the pastor is going to break the bread of life and hold up what could be considered the cup of wonder and tell us to “Take and eat, take and drink” and to “do this in remembrance” of Christ. Jesus told us the Spirit, the Helper, would come, and one of the helps he would give would be to “remind,” to remind us of Jesus and what He said and did.

Sometimes, in the darkest times, remembering alone is enough. The Hasidic Jews have a story:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mez-Rich, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished. Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I

cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

Each week we come to worship and hear again the story of how Jesus told us to "take and eat, take and drink," "do this in remembrance of me." It's not the ritual that does the work, it's the remembrance, the remembrance that Jesus reconciled us to God in the same way he restored Peter. I imagine that for the rest of his life when he struggled and faced hardship, and finally when he did stretch out his arms and die as Jesus predicted, Peter remembered that day on the beach when Jesus restored him to the fellowship of life, and the remembrance and wonder of it all restored him anew again and again and again.

When we walk in that kind of wonder we know what can see, in the words of Sarah Teasdale that:

Life has loveliness to sell, All beautiful and splendid things, Blue waves whitened on a cliff, Soaring fire that sways and sings, And children's faces looking up, Holding wonder like a cup.

Like Heschel we must ask God for wonder, and ask Him for wonder, and ask Him for wonder, until His children's faces, our faces, are looking up, holding wonder like a cup.

Amen.