

16 April 2017

**Raised With Him: Easter Day (John 21: 1-14)**

© Sarah Bachelard

In the chronology of John's gospel, the appearance of the risen Jesus by the Sea of Tiberias occurs late in the piece. He had appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden early on resurrection morn, and then in the evening of that same day, to the disciples in the upper room. He appeared again to his disciples in Jerusalem a week later, this time with a doubting Thomas present. But now we're all the way up north in Galilee, an unspecified amount of time later, with the disciples gone back to fishing as if their life with Jesus had never been.<sup>1</sup>

This is a bit strange. If Jesus has already appeared on all these occasions, what are the disciples doing back here? Why aren't they already out on mission trips, healing the sick, saving the world, and generally behaving like the early church?? Could it be that there's something about the dawning of new life that takes time to realise?

This Easter-tide, we've been focusing on the significance, the necessity of Jesus' passion – his transition from being one who acts and works in freedom, to one who suffers what others do to him. We saw on Good Friday that, in this movement, Jesus enters wholly into our human condition of exposure and vulnerability to chaos, violence and death. And for John, it's Jesus' willing undergoing of this exposure, his astounding desire to be with us as we do and suffer our worst, that reveals the nature of God as love.

It's tempting to assume, however, that this paradoxical 'work' of passion ended some time last night. On the cross, in the tomb, Jesus is clearly handed over.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, second edition (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.27.

But on Easter morning, it looks as though he's up again, back in charge – as if his suffering and death had been only a temporary suspension of normal transmission. Except – and this is key – Jesus does not raise himself from the dead. He is raised. And that suggests that resurrection is as much passion as crucifixion is. Resurrection, like suffering and death, is undergone, received. And this, it seems to me, has some pretty big implications for us.

Let's go back to the disciples in their boat. In the last days of Jesus' life, they too have been drawn into a transition from action to passion. With his death, they too suffer a descent into chaos, the loss of place, identity and meaning. As Rowan Williams has pointed out, in following Jesus they had been drawn beyond their religious and social belonging, stripped of their inherited identities. Yet their longings for power and influence in the promised new age have also come to nothing. When Jesus dies, there's a sense in which they die too. And this means, Williams says, that 'any identity, any reality they now have will have to be entirely gift, new creation; not generated from their effort or reflection or even their conscious desire'.<sup>2</sup> Resurrection, as the gospels proclaim it, is that gift to them. Yet part of what the appearance narratives suggest is that this gift is difficult to receive, or even at times to recognise as such.

What makes it so difficult? Perhaps, in part, it's because when things fall apart, the desire to go back to what used to work and to how things used to be, can be almost overwhelming. The only problem is that the old ways won't work anymore. As John imagines them, the disciples are back fishing. They should know what to do – but they've spent the night to no purpose. And perhaps also, what makes it difficult to receive the gift of resurrection is that the new life that's offered almost exceeds their capacity to receive or imagine it – think of that net straining

---

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.265-275, p.270.

with fish, and the disciples not daring to ask Jesus who he is although they know perfectly well who he is.

What then might it mean to be receptive to this gift, this desire of the risen Jesus to share with his disciples – with us – life freed from the thrall of death and no longer run by threat and fear? How may we give ourselves to be raised with him – here and now – despite everything that is still unresolved and suffering in us and in our world? For that's the point – resurrection isn't dependent upon everything being fixed and eased; it erupts in the midst of confusion and loss, and transforms the way we are and respond now – turning us, with him, into bearers of freedom and grace.

How may we undergo resurrection? It begins, as it did for Jesus, with our willingness to undergo a death – the death of an identity that is self-possessed, self-righteous, achieved rather than given. 'For if', as St Paul says, 'we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his'. (Romans 6:5). And what does undergoing this death actually mean? Sometimes, it's as simple as letting go of trying to make it, trying to be good, trying to get there by ourselves. It's as simple as relaxing our spiritual muscles, resting our weight wholly on God. And then resurrection unfolds, as it did for Jesus, as we dare to trust that the gift of new life really is meant for us: that we are forgiven, accepted, loved, allowed to be.

This process can take time – we have our own versions of going fishing back in Galilee. But it need take no time at all. The gift is given. It awaits only our realisation. For Christ is risen, he is risen indeed.