

**May 24, 2020 | Journey worship service**

**TEXT: [John 21:1–14](#)**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

Expectations are strange things:

On one hand, they help us to be prepared. When we expect it to rain on our walk, we bring an umbrella; when we expect to wait awhile, we bring a book; when we expect to hear bad news, we bring a friend.

On the other hand, expectations can mislead us. They can set us up for disappointment—we expect to find the Academy Award winning movie gripping, but doze off in the middle; we expect a joyful holiday with loved ones, until a conversation about politics generates a tension so thick you can slice it with a proverbial knife; you expect to walk across the stage in your high school stadium to receive your diploma, until a global pandemic hits and changes everything.

The story we read today is one that reminds us that this was true for the disciples too.

Looking back through the gospels, it's impressive to see how the disciples, in many ways, are masters at expecting the unexpected. With flare and ease they shed all that was expected of them to follow a Rabbi from whom they never knew what to expect. They left the lives they had grown up expecting: rising before dawn to catch fish for a living; coming home to their wives and kids each day; sticking close to the routine they knew best—one that brought security, sustenance and maybe a little peace. From the moment they heard Jesus call from the lakeshore, these expectations were gone, and life started to go in a very unplanned direction. They dropped their nets, left their homes, and travelled anywhere they could get by foot, following this itinerant preacher and healer who they hoped was the messiah. By Jesus' side, they had seen the unexpected time and time again: they collected twelve baskets of bread after watching Jesus feed 5,000 on a hillside from just two loaves and a few fish; they were served food by Peter's mother in law just moments after Jesus raised her from the dead. They sat around a table in an upper room while their teacher—their Messiah—took off his tunic and washed their feet in service.

Yet as we greet them in today's story, it appears that the trauma of Jesus' crucifixion has broken this pattern—and rightly so. Trauma does that. It unmoors us. It rattles our sense of safety on a cellular level. It shifts the ground under our feet and makes it hard to find our bearing. We don't know who and what we can trust. Although Jesus had warned of his betrayal and coming death, the disciples couldn't see it coming. The tragedy that struck the planes of human existence was no longer what they had come to expect. In fact, it wasn't until Jesus was arrested before their very eyes that his words started to make sense. He would be betrayed, crucified, would die and be buried. And in spite of his appearance to Mary outside of the empty tomb, and twice to the rest of the disciples in the upper room, the disciples did not know what to expect from this new world order. Yes, Jesus was alive again—but things were different. He was the same,

and yet somewhat unrecognizable; he would show up unannounced, but they couldn't sit at his feet anymore. The unexpected they had come to expect was no more. Even the disciples didn't know what to do.

They have no idea what to expect next—of the world, of Jesus, or even of themselves. So they go fishing. Well, seven of them do. Peter decides to head to the lakeshore, and six disciples follow. They go back to what they had known before—to a familiar pastime, to a former identity, to a season when life had all been so simple. They go back to catching fish, not people.

I don't know about you, but there have been many times over the last few months when I have been longing for something familiar. I've been looking for a foothold into life as it used to be before this pandemic struck—where I knew what to expect from a day. It was a life I could live with my eyes closed: where I knew right where the sauce was on the grocery shelf; where I could sense the text from my husband saying that he was picking up our son and heading home; where the baristas at Starbucks would make my order when they saw me coming into the door.

Frankly, I have wanted this foothold even more so for others than myself. I want my kid to be able to connect with expected people in expected ways—to do circle time at school and run around his Nana's house and to play trains with his Pap—to expect a routine from his day and friends with whom he can be silly. I want him to expect to see Miss Kay at the front desk when he comes to the church on a weekday and to climb on my lap on the Sanctuary Steps for a children's time. I want the graduating seniors to stand in the pulpit and deliver their messages on Youth Sunday, as they've expected to do all year; for all those expecting to be baptized this spring to feel warm water sprinkled over their heads; for kids who have expected to sing Awesome God in the Music Room to get to sing together at VCS. I want people to expect to be safe and healthy. I want people to expect to go to work in the morning and for new parents to expect casseroles and family on their doorstep ready to snuggle their new babies.

It is hard living in this season where we do not know what to expect. It is hard on graduates not getting to walk across the stage; it's hard on couples planning weddings and parents planning summer vacation for their kids. It is hard for teachers wondering what September will look like and patients awaiting a hip replacement. What's going to happen? How's everything going to play out? And where, the heck, is God?

We are not the first disciples who haven't known what comes next. We're not the first disciples who have hung out behind closed doors in fear. We're not the first disciples to head outside to clear our heads or go back to familiar territory when we didn't know how to face the present day. We're in good company. I've said it before, and I think it's even more true for today: The writer of Chapter 21 did us a favor.

Frankly, by all accounts, this is an odd story in the Gospel. The message of the good news would have seemed much tidier if it had ended a chapter sooner. Here we have the high note of Jesus' appearance to the women and then to the disciples—and finally

to even Thomas, the doubter. We have three appearances of the resurrected Christ—and we even read of him breathing the power of the Holy Spirit upon those gathered in the upper room. But instead we have Chapter 21. We have some back-pedaling and uncertainty. We have a quiet get-away to what was known. And instead of a Messiah who can walk through walls and breathe Spirit on everyone, we end this gospel with an image of Jesus stooped over a fire on the beach, frying up some fish.

The author who added on Chapter 21 has given us the gift of a lesson on discipleship that looks a lot like real life. In the best of times—as well as in the worst of times—there is a dance between faith and doubt; between certainty and uncertainty; between trust and fear; between energy and exhaustion... This dance—this tension—is a part of our real life and our real relationship with God. Yes, there are moments when Christ's presence seems certain and near, but there are also days when the intimate connection we once felt with God seems far away. We're tired. We're busy. We're exhausted. We're mad. We're afraid. Or we simply feel caught in the whirlpool current of the events around us and we cannot even find the bandwidth to cry out to God for help. It happens. We're human.

And, frankly, Christ expects it of us. He who took on our own flesh knows just what it is like to be a person—that humanity experiences sin and worry and brokenness. He knows that we're vulnerable and limited and that we live in a world beyond our control—a world with viruses and cancer and even other people who make rules or choices that have the power to impact us with or without our consent.

But this passage also reminds us that Christ is Christ. And, as Jesus did that day on the beach, God's promises are made known—to them and to us—once more. Through Christ God comes to us, whether we recognize Jesus in our midst or not. Christ meets us where we are and tends to our needs—as basic as they might be—feeding us: sometimes fried fish, sometimes a Communion meal, sometimes just enough to give us strength. And when we're ready, Christ calls again, reminding us that in all seasons and manners of life, we still belong to God.

God is with us, still. God is at work upon and through the brokenness and fear of this current moment, just as God was at work upon and through the brokenness and fear that filled the disciples after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Whether we have witnessed the tragic murder of a friend or the rising death toll brought by a global pandemic, God finds us in our fear and reminds us that God is always a God of life.

May this good news give us hope as we navigate the unexpected waters of these unprecedented times. May we find comfort in the promise that was made visible to the disciples that morning in an unexpected encounter on the beach: the promise that God is with us—too. May we expect, even now, that the power of the Risen Christ is in our midst and is at work in the world. Might our eyes and hearts be opened to envision a new normal that may, perhaps, be filled with Divine surprises—where life is renewed and love overflows and justice rolls down like a mighty river. For God who, in Christ, overcame sin, woundedness and even death—all the worst things we expect in this

world is bigger than this present moment, bigger than our fears, and bigger, even, than a pandemic. God is love—and is with us, now and always.

Thanks be to God!