

John 21

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[0 : 00] Turn back in your Bibles to John chapter 21. Open your hatch and the content of your space station will rapidly fill the vacuum outside.

Just bear that in mind. We hear of power vacuums too, don't we? And John chapter 21, I think one of the reasons it is written because the church abhors a vacuum too.

In chapter 20 of John's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus has already appeared to the disciples twice. There's been a change.

Because whilst he appears, it's not the same, is it? He also disappears from their sight. Jesus no longer seems to be with his disciples as he was before his death and resurrection.

In his earthly incarnational ministry. And that's what the disciples naturally want. Mary clings to Jesus in John 20.

[1 : 35] She wants Jesus like he used to be. And it might feel like that for you tonight. It might feel like that today. We worship the living Lord Jesus on Easter Sunday.

But I wonder, do you feel, does the church sense a Jesus-shaped space? And we want it filling with something.

For a couple of evenings, we're going to spend some time in John 21, this final chapter of his Gospel. And in some ways, it's actually not very easy to see why it's actually here in the Bible.

Just look to the end of chapter 20, if you've got a Bible in front of you. Those famous words. 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. Amen. Thank you very much and good night, says John.

[2 : 46] It feels like a great ending to his Gospel, doesn't it, at the end of chapter 20. We've got the cross and the resurrection out of the way. It is finished, Jesus says.

And it's the beginning of the end. Now what? And there is this space. Some say chapter 21 was written by another author.

Well, it isn't. And you only have to read to the end of the chapter to find that out, that John wrote the whole thing. But I think it's here to show us that post-resurrection, it's actually only the end of the beginning.

And that feeling of space in the life and work of the disciples and in the church is filled, despite appearances.

It's filled entirely and fully by the resurrected Lord Jesus himself. For an open-ended, indeterminate period of time, i.e. forever.

[3 : 53] And they, the disciples, need to see that. And we in the church need to see that. Despite what it might feel like tonight, what we might perceive as the presence of Jesus, or feel, there is no power vacuum in the church.

Jesus is going to continue working in and through the disciples. He won't be the resurrected and redundant Jesus, but the resurrected ruler and continual Lord of his church.

Just as he was before. Post-resurrection, the disciples, none of them will have nothing to do. And thankfully, neither will they have everything to do.

He will do what he's been doing with them until now. Even though there has been a change, he is back. And he's back not to sit back and let them do everything, but to work.

We celebrate the resurrection today and every Sunday, but we ask for Monday, well what now?

Well, post-resurrection, it is back to business.

[5 : 09] Because Jesus is back for business. So I want to look at three things in the first half of this chapter tonight. First of all, we sense after the change and excitement of the first couple of appearances, after the resurrection, firstly, the disciples' aimless work.

The disciples' aimless work. In this chapter, John gives us an account of the third appearance of the risen Jesus to his disciples in his gospel.

He's already appeared to Mary and to Thomas and some of the other disciples locked away in a room. We get a dramatic appearance here, don't we, by the shore of Lake Tiberias or the Sea of Galilee.

John, though, wants us to see the context here, to get into the mood, to get into the minds of the disciples. And in verse 1 to 3, we've got the scene.

A few of them are together. But this time, at least, they're not locked in that room, are they? They're out. They're returning to some semblance of normality.

[6 : 24] To some activity, some work. Life must go on. But we're not sure what they're doing. Peter, he's not one to sit around, is he?

He says, verse 3, I'm going fishing. And the others join in. Maybe I'm being unfair here, but it doesn't suggest that they had their hands full until that point.

And the other disciples didn't know what to do until Peter made that suggestion. I don't know if you can sense a slight aimlessness here. Jesus is physically absent and there's this question that hangs in the air.

Well, what now? It feels like there's a space. There's an awkwardness that just needs filling. It needs filling with something. So let's get busy.

Let's at least go back to what we know. Let's go back to our day job. But not only is it slightly aimless activity, it is futile activity too, isn't it?

[7 : 26] John adds in verse 3 that that night they caught nothing. Nighttime, John mentions here. It was a good time to fish, apparently.

Normally, you'd have your catch, which would be fresh for the early morning market the next day. Which makes this even weirder, doesn't it? Weirder that they don't catch anything.

And it feels like *deja vu*. From the first time that we hear of the disciples fishing and nothing. It's not even aimless work, it's futile work.

Something like the first time they met Jesus. Where it feels as though he is missing. The night time, as well in John's Gospel, isn't just about the shipping forecast and fishing details.

In John's theology, it signifies something theological. It signifies the spiritual darkness of a world that carries on without Jesus.

[8 : 31] That avoids and operates hidden from his light. A world which is busy, but dark spiritually. And I'm not saying that the disciples are trying to avoid Jesus.

But it feels as though we've regressed somewhat here. Into a namelessness, into a frustration. Before they recognise him, the figure on the shore asks, Have you got any fish?

No. It is finished, but without Jesus, The disciples are lost. They can't fill the space. They can't replace him.

That's impossible. You can't just fill the gap with stuff, with busyness. And if we believe that we are without true direction, We will make up our own direction, won't we?

We say absence makes the heart grow fonder, But it also is true that out of sight, out of mind. And in his physical absence, we are guilty of thinking Jesus has done his work, But now he's not here.

[9 : 43] The script has ended, and so we need to make up the rest. And the church, in some ways, has become quite aimless, hasn't it?

Trying every new fad, and technique and programme, going back to what we know best. But the fish don't seem to be coming. We celebrate in glory in the resurrection, but we imagine whilst Jesus is risen, he is also retired.

The church abhors a vacuum. The disciples aimless work. Secondly, the resurrected Jesus gives fruitful work.

The resurrected Jesus gives fruitful work. The answer to that imaginary space, in the life of the church, and in our lives, is not to fill it with what we choose.

But exactly what the disciples receive here. They receive a self-revelation of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, don't they?

[10 : 47] Just look at verse 1. After this, Jesus revealed himself by the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed himself in this way.

And that is how anything happens at all in the life of the church. It's how it's only ever happened. It's how anything has ever happened with God's people in the history of the whole of God's people.

The first thing that needs to happen before any real activity that makes any sense or is worth any while, the only thing that separates busyness and aimless activity from obedience, is that God reveals.

He reveals himself. He speaks to Adam and Eve. Be fruitful. Multiply. He reveals himself to Abraham. Go from the land of your fathers.

He speaks through the prophets. Speaks in the incarnation. And then as he speaks, things start to happen, don't they? His people begin to do things and obey him and have purpose.

[12:00] And in this brief hiatus of activity, the resurrected Jesus himself reveals himself. I'm back. And I'm back for business.

Tomorrow, or maybe when bank holiday is done, Tuesday, we might experience a bit of post-Easter decline in our spirits. The big celebrations, the eggs, the hallelujahs, and all of that.

When that's gone, what then? It's interesting how John has a particular nuance on the resurrection appearances in his gospel. And what we see, I think, is the repeated idea of Jesus revealing himself and consequently there being activity.

He appears and then sets his disciples to work. In their aimlessness, they need a revelation of the risen Jesus Christ. And that is why the Bible shows us that preaching is not just talking about Jesus. It is Jesus' talk. That the sacraments are not primarily about us professing to God about our faith and to one another, although it is that.

[13:23] It is about him professing to us and speaking to us and revealing his presence to us. In his physical absence, it is not the end.

And the plot thickens. Because the resurrected Jesus reveals himself and he continues to do so in his church.

And therefore there is activity. There is work going on. Just look with me at these three appearances at the end of John.

Just look to chapter 20, verse 17. This is when the resurrected Jesus meets Mary. And she wants to cling to him, doesn't she?

Jesus says to her, don't cling to me for I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and to your Father.

[14:22] Revelation, work, activity. Go, speak. And then appearance two, in chapter 20, verse 21. Jesus appears in this locked room and says, Peace be with you.

As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. Revelation, work, activity. And then appearance three, in our chapter this evening.

This chapter, if you read the whole thing, it's absolutely full of commands, actually. Listen to them. Disciples, verse 6. Cast the net.

Verse 10. Bring some fish. Later on in verse 15. Feed my lambs. Tend my lambs.

Verse 19. He says to Peter, follow me. Verse 22. You follow me. It's no longer aimless, futile work, is it?

[15:29] The whole chapter reminds us of his first calling then. As if to say, it is finished and it is back to business. It is the end of the beginning, but it is the beginning of the end.

And his revelation galvanises them. There is no vacuum. He is risen. He is not retired. And once they see him, they have him and they're set to work.

He gets them working here, doesn't he? But in the same way that he fed the 5,000 with them earlier in the gospel. He gets them to do the work, but he produces the blessing.

He provides the fruit. And here it's this monster catch of fish. John tells us 153 fish. Large fish.

What's that about? Well, actually I think that number is highly symbolic. I'm slightly pulling your leg because it's highly symbolic of the number of fish that was caught.

[16:32] That is it. The point is, there was a lot. He takes their efforts and he makes their work work.

Before he appeared, before he revealed himself, there was nothing. Zilch. But he produces the fruit, all 153 of them.

And in his resurrection appearance, he is leading and commissioning his church into action. And it's all done in his power. He's back.

Jesus gives them fruitful work. And thirdly and lastly, Jesus is the loving host. Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, is the loving host.

That word work, fishing, was hard work. And so is evangelism, isn't it?

[17 : 31] And church work and witnessing and being a Christian in the workplace. And the challenges of church life. We might feel that we don't always want to jump for joy in those things.

And we might feel the space. But it's work, isn't it? Notice that it's punctuated by the resurrected Jesus and his provision and his rest.

Like I said earlier, the chapter is full of commands that the resurrected Jesus gives. Revealing and then setting to work. But a lovely touch.

There is a command in verse 12 too. Come and have breakfast. It's not all fingers to the bone labour, is it? His yoke is easy.

His burden is light. It's a lovely scene. They do the work that he tells them to do. They cast the net. And he blesses the produce.

[18 : 35] And then the first thing they see when they get to shore. Verse 9. A charcoal fire with fish laid on it. And some bread. John uses three words for fish here.

And this one is singular. So it's probably a big fish on the grill. Like a, I don't know, a big tuna.

Something like that. Such a warming scene, isn't it?

It's inviting. It's like coming home. Jesus has been there preparing all of this. He's lit the fire. He's got the bread.

He provides. He hosts. He loves his tired, sometimes overworked, confused, excited disciples.

With a familiar love. It's a familiar scene, isn't it? As they eat with Jesus. Of that foot washing love that he's shown them.

[19 : 36] Of that serving. And of that dying. He's back. It would otherwise be a very ordinary scene, wouldn't it?

A few guys going out fishing. Having breakfast together. It's totally normal. It's totally mundane, really. Apart from this revelation of the resurrected Lord Jesus.

Who eats with them. And there is something now extraordinary about the ordinary. For want of a better word. It's almost spooky, isn't it?

This meal. There's a wonderful oddness about the living Jesus. An other worldly quality about him.

They don't recognise him, do they, at first.

Then they know it's him. None of the disciples, John tells us in verse 12, dared ask him, who are you?

[20 : 35] That word ask. It means to inquire. To scrutinise. To examine. To search out. John tells us they knew it was the Lord.

Yet they wanted to discover more, didn't they? To just make sense of him. He's the same, but he's different. He's heavy with the strangeness of new creation.

And it's a primal moment of simultaneous puzzlement and recognition at the same time. They can hardly put it into words. Not even in a question.

He's exciting. And a simple meal, breakfast, ends up being thrilling. Because he is there. The excitement is palpable, isn't it?

It's a real meal to remember. The last meal they had with him was before he was impaled on a cross. But now if my eyes aren't deceiving me, he's back.

[21 : 40] And he's cooking me fish for breakfast. He's giving me bread. With him, the mundane, aimless work of life.

The ordinary. The work of witness and of mission and of catching fish is utterly... Well, they've got no words to utter, have they?

Literally. And notice how just as in the work, the person of Jesus is central to everything that goes on here. He's central to this meal, to this meeting.

They're lost for words. They don't say anything. And the action, if you see, is all him as they sit down over the fire. They sit in silence as he takes bread and as he gives it to them.

And so with the fish. He does everything. The resurrected Jesus, he provides the fish. He cooks it. He serves it. He does it all.

[22 : 41] We're here tonight, aren't we? And we may, in some sense, feel the physical absence of the resurrected Lord Jesus.

But by faith, we need to see that the resurrected Lord Jesus is here. And he will pass out bread that he himself has procured.

Signaling his body and his blood. We know who he is. We know it's the Lord. And yet, tonight, we are going to eat with someone like the disciples who is different.

Who is glorified. Whose resurrection life excites us. Who we want to dare to ask, who are you?
A resurrected Jesus who galvanises us into work. And he says quite clearly to us, the resurrection is not my retirement.

[23 : 45] And he reveals himself to us tonight. And he commissions us to proclaim and to work. Yes, while he hosts us at the same time.

Come and have breakfast. I want to say more about this chapter next week. And this chapter, I think, it ties up several loose ends in the whole of the gospel.

And one of which is the relationship between the beloved disciple John and Peter. And we'll get on to that next Sunday. We get an insight into how Jesus intends his people to behave and to relate to one another in the vocations that he's given each of us after his resurrection.

Because there is no suggestion that the resurrection means retirement for Jesus or for the church. And Jesus has removed himself from the work of his church.

Far from it. And the disciples have to learn that they are to never think that we need to be a replacement or a substitute for Christ in the world.

[24 : 56] Because there is no vacuum. Jesus shows the disciples here that in his nearing physical absence, in his ascension, actually he is back.

And he's back for business. The resurrected Lord Jesus. And he calls us to cast the net and to get to work as he continues to reveal himself to us.

And as we're hosted by him tonight. And so we have all we need. And to have purpose. To have fruitful work.

We have him. Don't we? Because he's back. Let's pray together.