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Sermon Text: John 21:1-14
Sermon Title: "I Saw Him At My Breakfast Table!"

In Celtic mythology there exists a notion called "thin places." A thin place is a place where the visible world and the invisible world come into close proximity, where the world to come seems nearer, where the veil between this world and the next is, in a word, thin. Mahatma Gandhi alludes to this idea of thin places in his writings. He writes, "There is an indefinable, mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen power that makes itself felt and yet defies all proof – because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses."

What are those thin places in our lives where we experience God's mystery and power? Perhaps those places are special family celebrations, a wedding or baptism, a milestone event like a graduation or confirmation. Perhaps it's a special time of worship. On Easter, for example, when we celebrate the joy and hope of Jesus' resurrection. But just four weeks after Easter, what's our level of joy and hope today? For many of us, the mountain top of that miraculous Easter morning has given way to the mountains of everyday errands, deadlines, laundry, schoolwork, family commitments, and more. When those extraordinary moments give way to the ordinary, we begin to look toward the next special day or event, expecting that is when we'll get our next spiritual fix and experience God's presence again. But what about the days in between, when it's hard to feel God's presence, let alone see it, when those thin places, to borrow the analogy, seem all too thick? How do we glimpse God's presence with us, not only on special days, but in the ordinary, seemingly mundane days?

I imagine Peter and the other disciples felt some of these same longings as they gathered on the beach that night. They had just experienced the greatest of all spiritual highs: Their Lord

Jesus, whom they believed to be dead, was alive. They had seen him with their own eyes. They couldn't wait to see him again. So they traveled the 65 miles north of Jerusalem to Galilee where Jesus said he would meet them. Now they find themselves sitting on that familiar beach of the Sea of Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee, where they had seen Jesus do so many amazing miracles. Calm a storm. Feed thousands. So they sat and waited for Jesus to appear again and for their next big adventure with him.

But not many of us are good at waiting, are we? It doesn't come naturally for many of us. When we're in those seasons of waiting, it's easy to hit the reset button and go back to the default mode, to return to our old, familiar habits. So it is with Peter. Sitting on the beach, waiting, Peter decides he's going to go fishing, his old vocation. So Peter and the disciples set out in their boat at nighttime, the best time to catch fish. But when dawn comes, they still haven't seen a single fish. What they do see is a stranger standing on the beach.

The stranger tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat, assuring them that then they will find fish. When they do, Scripture says they caught so many fish that they weren't able to haul in the net. Seeing this miraculous catch of fish, John, the beloved disciple, says to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

But I imagine this exclamation wasn't even necessary for Peter. I imagine that even before he was told, Peter knew it was Jesus – for such is the power of memory.

That was not the first time Peter had experienced a miraculous catch of fish. Two weeks ago our small group discussed a passage in Luke 5, where Peter first meets Jesus. We talked about how intentionally and personally Jesus reaches out to Peter, doing whatever it takes to help Peter believe he is the Messiah for which he has been waiting. Just like the scene in John, the scene in Luke finds Peter the fisherman by a boat on the lakeshore. He has fished all night and

caught nothing. While Peter's cleaning his nets and getting ready to call it a day, Jesus gets into his boat. He tells him to push out into the water. And once there, Jesus tells him to let down his nets for a catch. When Peter does so, he catches so many fish that he can't haul them in. Then Jesus calls Peter to follow him. So Peter leaves everything – his boat, his nets – and follows Jesus. And so begins an incredible journey with Jesus.

Having had this first encounter with Jesus, Peter is more quick to recognize him the second time when once again Peter is in a fishing boat waiting for the Messiah. When once again he has fished all night and caught nothing. When once again a stranger at daybreak tells him to put out his nets one more time. When he does and he experiences that second miraculous catch, I imagine he doesn't even have to be told who's behind it. Memory has already made that clear. The memory of that earlier encounter with Jesus stirs in him, and upon hearing John's confirmation, he dives into the water, swimming as fast as he can to get to Jesus.

What are those memories in our own spiritual journey that remind us of God's presence with us in the past as we wait for Him in the present?

When I first graduated from college, I served on the staff of a youth ministry called Young Life. The area where I was on staff was Shelby, North Carolina, where the population of people my age was one – or at least it seemed that way. It was a challenging, lonely first year for me personally. At the end of the year, our Young Life regional director invited all of us to go on a solitude retreat. I was excited about the time to be with God and spend time in prayer and Scripture. But as an extrovert, I wasn't really sure about the whole concept of silence and solitude. Don't get me wrong. I grew to love these retreats and did them every year. But that first year, after such a *solitary* year, I wasn't sure I was up for a *solitude* retreat. The first morning of the retreat I woke up and headed to breakfast, wondering what the day would bring,

but admittedly not looking forward to sitting in silence at a table with others. I walked into the dining room, and there on the table was the most beautiful, amazing thing I had ever seen – a box of Honey Nut Cheerios - which in my humble opinion is the greatest cereal of all time. I mean, if you can't look forward to talking with someone at breakfast, at least you can look forward to your cereal, right? So I sat down and poured a bowl of cereal. Then I reached for the milk.

Only there was no milk on the table. I sat there for a second, scanning the room to see where the milk was. I mean, it wasn't like I could just whisper to my neighbor, "Would you please pass the milk?" But I knew that the silence piece of the retreat wasn't legalistic; if we needed anything, we were told simply to ask the retreat center staff, and they would take care of us. So when I didn't see any milk, I quietly got up from the table and walked back to the kitchen, where I found a woman on the kitchen staff. I asked her, "May I please have some milk?" She smiled, put her arm gently around me, and led me back to the dining room. Motioning to the tables, she said to me, "Everything you need is there on the table before you." I looked and saw a full pitcher of milk on each table. It had been there all along; I just hadn't seen it.

The woman's words ran far deeper than just a gallon of milk. With her words ringing in my ears, we went from breakfast to worship and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. (*Move to communion table.*) "Everything you need is there on the table before you." Everything we need is on the table before us. How do we know we can experience Christ's presence with us in the ordinary parts of our everyday lives? Because Christ made it possible by using the most ordinary, common elements – bread and wine – to demonstrate to us the most extraordinary of loves: His laying His life down for us in order that we might experience life with him, not just in the world to come, but in the world that is now. Everything we need is here on the table before us. (*Return to pulpit.*)

Jesus demonstrated His love to the disciples again in another meal on the beach that morning. I imagine that as Peter swam to shore with the disciples' paddling behind him in the boat, they all must be thinking what miracle they were going to see next with Jesus. They had seen him heal a blind man. They had seen him raise Lazarus from the dead. And now they had seen him raise himself from the dead. "What could top that? What could possibly be next?," they thought as they swam and paddled faster and faster. What amazing thing is Jesus going to have in store for us to do when we get to the beach?

What they find on the beach is some fish and bread over a charcoal fire with Jesus' inviting them to come and have breakfast. No special-ops mission to heal the sick. Just your ordinary, everyday Galilean breakfast. Do you think they were disappointed. Not in the least. Because having walked with Jesus in his ministry for three years, they understood that miracles come not just in the form of great healings or teachings or special times of celebration. They knew that one of the greatest miracles of all was the reality that Jesus, the God of the universe, chose to be with them, not just in those extraordinary moments, but in the ordinary moments as well – making even the most ordinary moments extraordinary. When they walked along dusty roads in town. When they went to the market. When they sat down to eat breakfast. Yes, Jesus would go on to call them to do something, to feed his sheep. But he first calls them to be with him, and he feeds them.

Jesus offers us the same invitation. He wants to be with us, to let him feed us, by accepting his invitation to be with us in our day-to-day faces and places. How? By opening ourselves to his presence and guidance at our family breakfast table, in the board room or exam room, on the soccer field, at the gym or the grocery store. Opening ourselves to God's

mysterious presence, when we feel God's presence and especially when we don't, and asking God to feed us. And then allowing God to feed others through us.

See, there's a double invitation here. Jesus invites them to come and have breakfast, to enjoy a meal and fellowship together. He also invites them to bring some of the fish they have just caught to the breakfast table. Why? When planning his grocery list, did Jesus not pick up enough fish at the local Publix? Even if Jesus was short on fish, surely the one who miraculously fed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish on that same beach just a short time before, surely he could also miraculously feed just 7 disciples that morning?

The answer, of course, is yes. Yes, Jesus certainly had enough food, and he certainly could have fed many more than the 7 disciples. But he wants them not only to experience the meal, but to participate in it as well. To be fed by Jesus, and then to go out and to feed His sheep with what Jesus has given us. In Judaism, an abundant catch of fish was a sign of God's blessing. Jesus invites them to offer some of the blessing they themselves have received from God in order to be a blessing to others.

What does that look like? Last month James and I returned to Shelby, North Carolina, for a wedding celebration. It was a fun time to reconnect with old Young Life friends, one of whom is a woman named Helen. Helen is in her early 70's. She and her husband have been serving as Young Life leaders for over 30 years – they still are active leaders to this day. In talking with her, I remembered that she had taught piano for a while. I asked her if she still played the piano. She told me, yes, in fact, about a year or so ago she had made a CD. She decided to make a CD of her playing hymns on the piano so that her children and grandchildren would have something by which to remember her and what she did. As she began to work on the CD, she wondered if there was something more she could do with it. Her church was involved

with a mission called Partners With Haiti. So she got in touch with a pastor of a church in Haiti, and she asked him if she could donate the proceeds from the sales of the CD to help his congregation purchase music instruments for their church building. When the pastor hesitated, she rephrased the question: “Do you have a church building?” she asked. “No,” the pastor said, “We don’t.” She then asked if he would allow her to donate the CD proceeds to help his congregation build a church building, and he agreed. Helen raised over \$25,000 through her CD project. With those funds, the AFCA Church in Haiti was built to completion in a village outside of Port-au-Prince, with a sanctuary designed to seat 800.

Not long after the church building was completed, Helen, along with all the world, watched in horror on January 12 as pictures of the devastating earthquake flooded the news. She thought for sure that the church building had been destroyed. A few days later she learned that the building was intact. In fact, it was the only building left standing in the village, and it had survived the earthquake without so much as a scratch. The Sunday following the earthquake, the sanctuary was filled to overflowing, as thousands upon thousands of people came to worship and to pray. All because one woman set out to leave a legacy for her children – and left a legacy for all of God’s children.

What gifts or skills do you and I have that we might offer to bring to Jesus to participate in His mission? Those gifts don’t have to be anything fancy. Jesus used basic elements of **water, a net, fish, and bread** to reveal His presence to the disciples on the beach that morning. Those same basic elements can reveal Jesus’ love to people in our community and world today.

- Clean drinking **water** can help prevent 80% of the world’s diseases
- A mosquito **net** can cut the spread of malaria in half

- Tuna **fish and bread**, thought ordinary food staples to many of us, can become extraordinary when put in the hands of the Southeast Gwinnett Cooperative Ministry to help support families in our community today.

Or to bring it even closer to home, in fact, just across the parking lot. Pat Black, Linda Cline, and I met with the guidance counseling department of South Gwinnett High School last week to talk about opportunities to partner together. The counselors said the biggest issue they face as a school community is that families are under-resourced. The resource they need most is people. People to tutor students or help with homework after school. People to serve as mentors or companions to both students and parents to walk with them through the challenges of high school life. People like you and me. Speaking on behalf of all of us who gathered that morning, I would say that meeting became for us one of a “thin place” when one of the guidance counselors offered to pray for the other counselors and our congregation for what God might do through this partnership, so great was his faith that God was up to something in our community.

What are those resources and blessings God has given us that you and I can offer to God’s mission across our parking lot and across the world?

How do we experience the mystery of God’s presence with us, not just on special occasions, but in the ordinary days of life? When we offer up the ordinary to the extraordinary: When we offer our ordinary lives to the extraordinary love of the One who calls us, not only to be with Him, but to participate with him. Then we will see the Kingdom to come draw near to the world that is, and the line between heaven and earth will become gloriously thin. Let us pray.