Easter 3C / April 14, 2013 / John 21:1-19 / Don Holmstrom

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus, the crucified and risen Savior. Amen.

The gospel reading this morning is like a one act play—a one act play with three scenes. The first we could title FISHING; the second FEASTING; and the third FOLLOWING.

The setting: the shoreline of the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee. The time: a few days after Easter. The cast: seven disciples and Jesus. The props: a boat, a fishing net, a charcoal fire pit, and 153 fish.

As the curtain opens, we see a boat rocking on its tether and the disciples of Jesus talking on the beach. Simon Peter says he’s going fishing and the others say they’ll go with him.

The disciples sail out a hundred yards are so and cast out the large net. The fishing continues throughout the night until the sun finally peeks above the horizon. No fish have been caught. Then Jesus calls out from the shore, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” It sounds a bit sarcastic, but maybe not. The disciples, who do not recognize him, yell back, “No.” Jesus offers instruction: “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” And they do what he suggests. Bingo! The net is full of flopping fish, straining at the cords.

The disciple whom Jesus loves—his best friend, maybe—shouts out, “It is the Lord!” And he’s right. It seems whenever something wonderfully miraculous happens, you can be sure Jesus has had a hand in it. You can go from zero to 153 in seconds flat.

At this point, for comedy relief, Simon Peter, who we are told is naked, puts on his clothes and jumps into the lake. It makes no sense but there you go. Perhaps he knows he’s swimming toward holiness and wants to be reverently dressed.

So Scene One, titled FISHING, ends with Peter swimming to shore, and the disciples following along in the boat, bringing with them a huge haul of fish.

Scene Two, titled FEASTING, opens with Jesus squatting at a charcoal fire on the beach. He’s grilling fish fillets. A bread basket is nearby. Jesus looks up as his dripping disciples walk on shore. “Bring some fish you’ve just caught,” he says. So Simon Peter, with soggy clothes, climbs up in the boat and somehow manages to pull off the net full of fish on to the beach—153 of them, you’ll remember. The number may mean something theologically. But it certainly means they caught a lot of fish. And maybe that’s the point. With Jesus comes abundance.

Well, Jesus, who is still kneeling by the fire, offers an invitation, “Come and have breakfast.” And perhaps the audience will remember an earlier scene in another play, where Jesus takes two fish and five loaves of barley bread and feeds five thousand people. When Jesus hosts a meal it turns into a feast. It’s clear to the disciples who this cook is—it’s the risen Jesus, the Easter Jesus. So Scene Two, titled FEASTING, ends with the disciples and Jesus eating breakfast and rejoicing.

And now we come to Scene Three; the one called FOLLOWING. We could also title it FORGIVING, I suppose. But never mind. The breakfast is over, and now we see a tender scene focusing on Jesus and Simon Peter. A spotlight is shining softly on just these two. The audience will remember, no doubt, that Peter, a few days ago, had denied even knowing Jesus—denied him three times, in fact. The number three is important for this scene. For Jesus is now going to ask Peter three times if he loves Jesus and three times Peter confesses that he does.

“Simon son of John,” Jesus says, “do you love me more than these?” He gestures toward the other disciples.

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs,” Jesus says. Jesus asks the same question again and Peter responds with the same answer. Jesus says, “Tend my sheep.” Then Jesus leans closer and whispers. “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Even if you’re sitting in the back row at this one act play, you can see the hurt on Peter’s face. How many times must he pledge his love? he wonders. Apparently as many times as he denied Jesus. Peter sighs deeply and replies, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep,” Jesus says, perhaps touching him gently on the arm. The Lord goes on to tell Simon Peter what this following the Lord will cost. Peter will be led to a cross, too, Jesus says. Peter will have the same kind of death as his Savior.

And then Jesus looks at Peter and the audience, too. “Follow me,” he says.

First, there’s silence, then the audience begins to applaud—just a few people at first but quickly it turns into a standing ovation.

At this point, you would think the actors would bow and the curtain would drop. Everyone would head home: some trying to find their cars in the parking lot, others checking for text messages, others talking about how much they enjoyed the performance, while still others are already worrying about all the work that lies ahead tomorrow.

But here’s the thing. The curtain does not drop on this play, because the play’s not over. “Follow me,” Jesus keeps saying. And the audience—that’s you and me—the audience doesn’t leave, but instead we step up onto the stage. We know who this is. He’s made himself known in the Word, in the water, in the bread and wine. He has made himself known in the forgiveness we receive from loved ones, in the feasting with friends, and in the miracle of casting out nets of love and grace far and wide, pulling us all in. More than 153 of us for sure!

And what a strange cast Jesus assembles. Not just fisher folk and tax collectors, but teachers, and lawyers, and pastors, bookkeepers, farmers, plumbers, and clerks. He calls CEO’s, nurses, doctors, car mechanics and truckers, organists and flutists, school children and college students. He calls infants who are just learning how to smile and serious teenagers who are trying not to. Everyone steps into the light now. It’s a casting call using wide nets of grace and love.

“Follow me,” Jesus keeps saying. The salvation play goes on and on. And we already know our first line. It goes like this: “My Lord and my God!”

Amen.