

“Punching Holes”
John 21:1-14

Ben Johnston-Krase
April 21, 2013

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. ⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Last week—before the attacks in Boston and before I joined you and millions more glued to the news for a dramatic and horrifying five days—last week, I was just like everyone else, I guess. In particular, I was doing some research and mapping out a few sermons and Bible studies to come, so I was digging around online, reading biblical commentaries, and in retrospect now, naively thinking through what I thought would become today’s message.

It’s shocking and unsettling how we can catch ourselves in life behaving like we know what to expect from one week to the next and even one day to the next, isn’t it? Of course, what else are we supposed to do but plan our lives with the idea that whatever is normal today will continue to be normal tomorrow? But then there are two explosions at the end of a race, and suddenly Boston becomes a city that’s not so far away, its people become our neighbors, and we collectively enter a “new normal”—a new perspective of life and the world around us in which we cannot help but incorporate these new images of violence and tragedy.

Granted, our “new normal” brings images of great heart and heroism—first responders who, it turns out, were people just like you and me, doing what we hope we would have the courage and wherewithal to do in a situation like that—folks rushing in to hold, comfort, and carry strangers to safety. Monday afternoon revealed a couple of men’s dark and twisted intentions, but then it also revealed humanity’s great capacity for strength and compassion coupled with our nation’s collective hope and goodwill for a city coping with tragedy.

Still, I like the “old normal” better, whatever that was—the “normal,” at least, that didn’t include pressure canisters loaded with nails and ball bearings, the “normal” in which crowded sporting

events weren't potential venues for destruction, the "normal" when no one had to worry about ricin in the mail, the "normal" before fear and terror... Was that "normal" ever real? Did we dream, somehow, that life could exist without such brokenness and chaos? Don't we catch ourselves all the time, dreaming that a "good normal"—a normal without destruction or despair—is something we can count on?

The trouble is, friends, that "normal" is a moving target. It doesn't matter who you are or where you are in this marathon journey of life, there is no "normal" that will hold still for long, for each new mile in the race adds a new dimension of "normal"—the birth, the death, the falling in love, the divorce, the diagnosis... the "new normal" that unfolds each day when we realize that we can never go back and start the race over.

Simon Peter said to his friends, the disciples, "I'm going fishing. Remember that, guys, when we used to fish all the time? The 'old normal'? Before Jesus, before the healing and the teaching, yes, but also before the running from one town to the next and before Jerusalem and our last Passover and before the betrayal and the arrest, before I denied even knowing Jesus, and before his death... I want to go back. I'm going fishing."

The disciples went with him, and so there they were, seven disciples out in a boat, fishing all night. Maybe they fished in silence, each one wondering if this was their "new normal" now that Jesus had risen from the dead but was now gone again. Or maybe they spoke. John writes that they caught nothing that long night—that each time they pulled up their nets, they were empty. Maybe they wondered aloud to each other what they might do next with their lives: keep fishing, go home, buy a farm, maybe get married...

By daybreak, perhaps, they had settled so deeply into their sense of the "new normal" that when Jesus appeared on the beach, they didn't even know it was him. Even when they heard his voice: "Children, you have no fish, have you?" they could only answer, "No."

Sometimes Jesus appears to us in our "new normal"—the normal of life with cancer, the normal of life with a grown child serving overseas in the military, the normal of separation, the normal of despair—sometimes Jesus shows up on the beach of our "new normal," and we are so thoroughly entrenched in the reality with which we are trying to cope that we cannot see him or recognize his voice.

Back in the 1850's, celebrated author Robert Louis Stevenson was a young boy, and for an extended period of time he was quite ill and so was confined to his home with the company of a nurse. One evening, it is said, he stood transfixed, gazing out his bedroom window, fascinated by a sight that held his undivided attention. Finally his nurse asked him what he was looking at so intently. It turns out that he was watching a lamplighter at work. Back then the gas streetlamps had to be lit, each one, individually, and so the lamplighter came down the street at the end of each day like an acolyte, lighting up the night. But that's *not* what Robert Louis Stevenson told his nurse when she asked him what he saw outside his window. Instead, he told her, "I'm watching a man punching holes in the darkness."

When we see Jesus, standing on the beach, calling out to his friends adrift on the sea, we see a man punching holes in the darkness. When we hear Jesus calling out to them to throw out their next *just one more time*, and when we see the nets coming in full of fish, we see a man punching holes in the darkness. When we read of the risen Christ simply fixing breakfast on the beach, we see a man punching holes in the darkness of the disciples' doubt and despair. And even now, as we struggle to find ourselves in the "new normal" of life after the bombs in Boston, we know friends—we know that the risen Christ is punching holes in that darkness.

This past week reminded us all that sometimes in our world and in our own lives, darkness descends, and it is *real*. But today the gospel reminds us that the living Christ punches holes in the darkness.

About this time a couple of years ago, on Maundy Thursday, at an army base in Afghanistan—a land all too familiar with explosive afternoons—the Christian chaplain there held a foot-washing service for those soldiers who wanted to observe Holy Week. There were about sixty soldiers in the tent, the chaplain reports, when a general stepped forward, grabbed the towel of service, knelt, unlaced the dusty boots of his troops, and joined with several others in washing their feet. That's the risen Christ punching holes in the darkness. [1]

There's a church in West, Texas called the Church of the Assumption. It's a Catholic congregation that worships just ten blocks away from the fertilizer plant that exploded so violently Wednesday night. In the aftermath of the explosion, emergency response teams coordinated their efforts at the church, which also quickly became a makeshift food pantry where workers, volunteers, and families could get a meal any time of the day. Several of the dead from the blast were members of the church, and the priest there has been bouncing back and forth between the food pantry and the chapel, praying, feeding, comforting, weeping... That's the risen Christ punching holes in the darkness. [2]

Acts of compassion and healing in Boston on Monday afternoon—punching holes in the darkness. Rushing in to comfort family members and loved ones—punching holes in the darkness.

Today in worship we welcome Jon Christensen, a healing presence in our community as he offers counseling and support for veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and walking with them through the issues they face as they return to a "new normal" from the battlefield—punching holes in the darkness.

You, here today—in spite of all that is broken and hurtful in our world, daring to believe in goodness and in light, daring to love, daring to serve as Christ served, daring to reach out and breath life and connection into the world around you—punching holes in darkness.

Friends, Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead so that humanity could collectively continue to wash its hands of the wounds and injustices of this world. Rather, he rose to announce, now and forever, that though the darkness around us is real, we do indeed carry resurrection power in our hearts and minds and fists. And so, together, we join the risen Christ when we punch holes in the darkness around us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. This illustration comes from a Working Preacher podcast, published on April 18, 2011, though I ran across it in Mark Ramsey's April 24, 2011 sermon, "Eye to Eye," preached at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, NC.

2. From the April 19th *National Catholic Register* - <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/local-church-offers-comfort-in-wake-of-texas-tragedy>