

## ***Beachcomber Jesus***

A Morning Message for Worship on Communion Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
April 3, 2016  
Text: John 22:1-14

I am about to date myself, and no doubt some of you too. How many of you remember the movie *Beach Party* with Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon? (pause) It was the first of a series of what became known as the *Beach Party* movies of the 1960's. These movies were wildly successful even as there were incredibly simple. All centered on the boyfriend/girlfriend relationship between Funicello and Avalon who found themselves embroiled in various adventures all centering around life in the surfer culture of the California beaches. When we watch them today the innocence of the era they captured forever on film is so far removed from today's realities that it can be difficult to believe life was ever really like that. And perhaps it wasn't. But in some ways it was. Boyfriend and girlfriend just hanging out at the beach, the girls in modest bikinis, at least by today's standards, and perfect hair and the boys in simple swim trunks also with the requisite perfect hair. Funny thing about the hair. It never changed no matter if they were surfing, falling into the water, playing volleyball or just sitting. That hair was immovable and impermeable. Sort of like our memories of that long ago time.

I loved these movies when I was a kid and dreamed of somehow adopting that California beachcomber lifestyle. I fantasized about being best friends with Annette or her TV counterpart, Gidget. Remember that show? Sally Field's first foray into acting was as the tiny girl surfer who always managed to solve all sorts of teenage problems from the back of a surfboard. Amazing. These girls became the ideal for so many of us who grew up with them in the 1960's. We wanted those beach bunny bodies. We wanted that perfect, immovable hair. We wanted those cute, unusual names. I distinctly remember asking my mother and dad at one point if I could change my middle name from "Ann" to "Annette" and then just drop the Ruth. To their credit, they didn't slam that door shut as they could have. I distinctly remember my mom saying, "maybe someday." I took that as a yes and immediately attempted to get my friends to start calling me Annette. It didn't work. "Ruthie" I was and "Ruthie" I remained, my dreams of being beachcomber Annette fading away.

I'm telling you all this because I want you to understand that when I read this morning's story from the Gospel of John about Jesus cooking out on the beach, I bring all these beachcomber memories of my youth with me into that story. Truth is we all bring all of who we are with us anytime we engage with the biblical text. None of us are blank slates when we encounter the Scriptures and that's very important to remember. Each time we

approach a biblical text – any biblical story – we bring our own memories and experiences with us and they become the lenses through which we see and hear the story. So, in a very real way, there are several contexts in play every time we engage with the Bible for study and reflection. The first context is the one the text is grounded in and focused on explaining or addressing, whether in story form, or as poetry or prose. The second context is the one in which that text was written down and edited. In other words, as pen was being put to paper, what was happening in the world of the scribe recording the words of the text. Then the third context, and the one we so often forget about is our own context. What about us and our lives and our way of being in and interacting with the world do we bring with us into our reading of and reflecting on the meaning of the biblical text?

So, as we consider this wonderful story from John this morning, we begin by realizing the first context of the story, the one in which it is grounded. This context tells us in no uncertain terms that this is an account of a Resurrection appearance of Jesus. We also recognize this is a uniquely important one because it combines a resurrection appearance with a miracle story. The second context, the context of the life of the scribe or writer putting pen to paper to record the story, would have been within a unique community of followers of Jesus, most likely based in Ephesus. John, the latest of the Gospels, is different from the

other Gospels in many ways, not the least of which is the long speeches it attributes to Jesus. This text would also have been written down as the followers of Jesus were starting to realize that Jesus was not coming back right away, so they needed to figure out what this meant to their lives and their faith in a violent world increasingly hostile to them.

Finally we come to the third context of engaging with this text – our own. Who are we as we encounter, study, reflect on, wrestle with this text? I've already explained part of my context as someone whose beach memories are powerful and undeniable. I suspect all of you, living so close to some of New England's most beautiful beaches, also have powerful and meaningful beach memories. How do those beach experiences, those beach memories enter into your encounter with this wonderful story?

As we engage with this text, I invite you to take a moment and imagine you are on your favorite local beach doing what you most love to do at the beach. Perhaps you're just sitting there with a good book, people watching. Perhaps you're diving into the waves or body surfing. Perhaps you're walking alone or with a friend. Perhaps you're picking up sea shells or sea glass. Whatever it is, you are doing something that feels comfortable, that feels good, especially in the wake of a jarring experience of some sort. Now, imagine that walking toward you on the beach is a guy dressed like anyone would be on the beach. Nothing unusual

about his appearance per se and yet something is very different about him at the same time. As he comes closer, you just know he's Jesus. You just know it. You also know it doesn't make sense that it's Jesus, but in this moment, that doesn't matter. Are you with me? That's the context you bring to this story, or the one you can bring if you take the time to add a little imagination to your encounter with the Bible – and that, dear friends, we should *always* do!

Now that we have our imaginations a little more engaged, let's look at the story together. First, there's the disciples. The text says there are seven of them, some named, some not. Note, if you will, another appearance of the unnamed Beloved Disciple. As I explained last week, the Beloved Disciple is never named anywhere in Scripture and scholarly debate on who it might be comes up with several possibilities. I also explained last week that of all the possibilities, I most like the idea of it being Lazarus, Jesus' dear friend whom he raised from the dead. But whomever the Beloved Disciple was, he is once again the first person among the seven to recognize Jesus as Jesus. But it's Peter who, quite typically, over-reacts once the identity of Jesus is pointed out to him. He quickly pulls on some clothes (apparently fishing naked was the norm), jumps into the water and splashes his way up on the beach to Jesus.

Just before all this happened and before anyone had recognized him, Jesus calls out to the men from the shore asking if they had caught any fish. They told him “no” so he tells them to cast the net to the other side of the boat. As soon as they do, they are able to haul in a huge catch of 153 fish. This is the point at which the Beloved Disciple recognizes Jesus, shouts it out and Peter jumps into the water. When they all make it up on the shore they realize Jesus has a charcoal fire going with some bread baking for them. He asks them for some fish to cook as well. When the food is ready, Jesus says to them, “Come and have breakfast” which they did. And that’s where the story ends.

I LOVE this story. Perhaps it all those happy *Beach Party* movie memories. Perhaps it’s the humanness of Jesus in this story. Perhaps it’s because this story is just so vivid in its description of this incredible encounter between the Risen Christ and the disciples in the most unlikely of locales. Jesus is so real in this story and so are the disciples, and that’s actually the whole point. The entire intent of this story is to convince the hearer, the reader, of this story that Jesus was a real, live human when he cooked breakfast for the disciples on the beach. He was not a ghost, belief in which was common at the time. He was not a vision or an hallucination brought about out of the profound grief of the bereft disciples. He was Jesus, as he had always been, with one exception. He was now the Resurrected Jesus who had

defeated death itself thanks to the power of God. That's the whole point of this story and that is its significance to us.

But how? Why? Scholars have debated this for almost two millennia, going all the way back to St. Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. And in all their efforts to understand the how and why of this story they have literally picked it apart. They pondered about the significance of the Beloved Disciple once again recognizing Jesus first. They've made excuses for the naked Peter who had to pull on some clothes before jumping into the sea to get to Jesus. They have spent enormous time and energy pondering the significance of the enumerated catch of 153 fish. There must be significance to that number, they reasoned, and they did their darndest to come up with one using mathematical theory and numerology. They've argued about whether or not Jesus blessed the bread and fish before he called the disciples over to eat and someone just forgot to mention it. Biblical scholars have literally pored over this text to parse out its meaning for themselves, and for you too, if you will let them.

And that, for me, is the key point of all this. That point is this. YOU must make this story your own if it is to be part of how faith is able to transform your life and your faith. And not just this story, but all the stories of the Scriptures. You must love the Bible not as a sacred object in and of itself but as a diary and roadmap of the faith of generations before you who have wrestled

with the same questions about God and Jesus that you have. You must get to know Jesus not as a sacred being sitting next to God in some heavenly throne room, but as a real person who cooked fish on the beach for his friends when he knew they were confused and hurting. And that will be our task this Eastertide season.

Between now and Pentecost in the middle of May, we will be examining the resurrection appearances of Jesus to see and understand how they can help us develop and deepen the faith God gifts us with if and when we are ready to receive it.

Beachcomber Jesus is the first Jesus we have met together and there are more to come. I hope you'll want to be a part of this journey of discovery as we prepare ourselves for the simple task Jesus gave to the disciples when he greeted them outside the empty tomb on Easter morning – “Go and tell.” Go and tell others what your faith means to you. Go and reveal to others the difference knowing Jesus has made in your life. That is our task. That is our challenge. That is our life, as followers of the Risen Christ. Are we up to it? Let's find out together. Amen.