

Cast Yourself Into the Sea: Faith When the World Is Burning

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everybody. Welcome. It's so good to see you. My name is Anthony. I also get to serve as one of the pastors. I'm going to get the hot tub in the room out of the way real quick. So we're going to do baptisms in a little bit. We're going to do baptisms after communion. We've got three folks who are being baptized this morning. So we're excited for that.

Thank you.

I've been thinking about leaps of faith that have led to flops. Anybody remember in 2020, they attempted to launch a new streaming service called Quibi? Anybody remember Quibi? It was this like neologism of quick bites. They were like these seven-minute long, highly produced television shows that they thought was going to take the world by storm.

They invested hundreds of millions of dollars in it. They got like a Super Bowl ad. They had all these celebrities. And then the pandemic hit and nobody was standing on the Metro platform watching seven-minute videos.

And if you want that, just go to YouTube or TikTok. Nobody wanted this. So it failed spectacularly. It shut down within months. It was a flop. Many of us are probably too young to remember this, but back in 1985, Coke tried to introduce new Coke.

[1 : 38] Okay? Yeah, some folks remember. So they put themselves in this like sea of innovation. And customers revolted so dramatically that they had to change back to the original formula within 77 days.

And the president of Coca-Cola had to hold a press conference to apologize to America. Man, I wish they held more press conferences to apologize to America. Consider the case of Segway, now known for like the tour guides that like lead you through the mall or whatever.

So the inventor said that he was going to sell 10,000 of these, 10,000 units a week. And the cities would be redesigned for Segways.

Guess how many they sold in their first year? 6,000. Not a week, 6,000 for the entire year. Who remembers the Fyre Festival of 2017?

Marketed as a luxury music experience on a private island with gourmet food and villas. But instead they had to sleep on soggy disaster relief tents and cheese sandwiches.

[2 : 46] People paid thousands of dollars and had to like fight over wet mattresses. So sometimes we want to be like Peter going out to walk on the water and we cast ourselves into the sea and we sink.

And sometimes our leaps of faith look more like belly flops. And then there are moments when Jesus shows up on the shore and everything changes. So we're going to take a look at John chapter 21.

If you have a device or a Bible, you can turn there and sort of bookmark it for a moment. I'll be honest with you. This year, I have been dreading preaching an Easter sermon.

Tanetta and I usually sort of take turns on who's going to preach the Easter sermon. It's the coveted sermon. It's the one where the most people show up, the most people are watching online, where you want to be the person with the microphone, you know, preaching the word to the most faces.

But this year, like I had to stop myself multiple times from calling up Tanetta and saying like, I got nothing to say. Because in a world, in a country, in the midst of so much awfulness and violence and chaos in our country and our world, how do I get up here and offer anything beyond platitudes about hope that don't actually change anything?

[4 : 08] When I look at our world, at authoritarianism creeping or stomping its way into our democracy, at immigrants being disappeared by our government, at our tax dollars funding the slaughter of innocent children and civilians in Palestine, I wonder what resurrection could possibly mean.

What does a 2,000-year-old story about an empty tomb have to say to us now? And I find myself with a diminishing reservoir of righteous anger.

My grief is beginning to feel stale, and that scares me. I'm very often fueled by righteous anger and grief. I need my grief to transform into fuel.

I need the waste and the pain of this life to become compost where new things can grow. So I've been struggling, I'll admit that, even as a pastor, as a preacher.

So I had to turn to my theology books and my history books to sort of give me some reminders. I'm reminded that Christianity was never a faith designed for comfortable times.

[5 : 14] It wasn't born in peace and prosperity. Our faith emerged in the shadow of one of history's most brutal empires. Jesus was lynched as a state criminal.

His followers were persecuted minorities. If I think my faith only makes sense when things are good, then I don't really understand my faith at all.

The reality is that Christianity began as a movement of the marginalized Jesus himself. He was born to an unwed teenage mother in an occupied territory.

His family became refugees fleeing political violence. He grew up in Nazareth, a backwater town so unremarkable that one of Jesus' disciples, Nathaniel, famously asked, can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Jesus didn't gather the elite as his followers. He called fishermen and tax collectors and zealots, working class laborers and political radicals. The women who financially supported his ministry were those who had been healed of various ailments, women who had been cast out by society.

[6 : 22] For the first three centuries of its existence, Christianity flourished primarily among the poor and the enslaved and those that the empire deemed as less than human, women and children, precisely those with the least power in Roman society.

The Roman philosopher Celsus mocked Christianity as a religion of wool workers, cobblers, laundry workers, and the most illiterate bucolic yokels. He wasn't wrong about their demographics, just about their significance.

When Rome burned in 64 CE, Emperor Nero blamed the Christians and the Jews, not because they were powerful, but because they were powerless. They were the perfect scapegoat, strange and misunderstood, and lacking the social capital to defend themselves.

Under persecution, Christians gathered in catacombs, underground burial chambers to worship. They developed symbols like the fish to identify themselves secretly to one another.

And far from the halls of power, they shared meals and they sang hymns and remembered their executed leader who promised that the last would be first. Early Christian writings like the Didache and the Letters of Ignatius reveal a community obsessed with caring for widows and orphans and the poor.

[7 : 42] They pooled resources to buy the freedom of enslaved people. During plagues, they were the ones that stayed in the cities to care for the sick when the wealthy fled. As the historian Alan Kreeter notes, the early church had no dedicated buildings, no professional clergy, no political influence, and yet it grew to a rate of 40% per decade.

Why? Because their resurrection faith showed up most powerfully in how they lived, especially in how they cared for the most vulnerable. So perhaps nowhere is the contrast between authentic Christianity and its imperial counterpart more stark than the history of American slavery.

Slaveholders had their own version of Christianity, one that conveniently placed passages like slaves obey your earthly masters higher while ignoring Jesus' proclamation of freedom for the captives.

Slaveholders' Christianity was a religion of hierarchy and authority and submission to earthly powers, a religion that blessed and sanctified the status quo.

Frederick Douglass observed that the most brutal slaveholders were often the most religious. He wrote, For all of the slaveholders from whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst.

[8 : 59] But along this perversion of faith emerged what historians call the invisible institution, the Christianity of the enslaved. Meeting in hushed harbors deep in the woods at night, enslaved Christians developed their own theology centered on a God who liberates the oppressed.

In the religion of the enslaved, Moses leading his people out of bondage wasn't just ancient history, it was a promise. Yes. The crucifixion wasn't just about personal salvation, it was about God identifying with the suffering.

And the resurrection wasn't just a miracle, it was the assurance that death, even death by lynching, would not have the final word. The spirituals they sang told a different story than the sermons they were forced to listen to on the plantation.

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land, and tell old Pharaoh, let my people go. Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel? Why not every man? Wade in the water, Wade in the water, children, God's gonna trouble the water.

This was resurrection faith forged in the crucible of oppression. Not a faith that required comfort and power to thrive, but one that flourished precisely in their absence.

[10 : 16] Christianity as the religion of empire is the aberration, not the norm. When Christianity becomes the religion of the powerful, it has always lost its way. The moment Christians begin building grand cathedrals with imperial wealth, they were already forgetting the catacombs where their ancestors worshipped.

So, I don't want to fall into the trap, and I don't want you to fall into the trap of thinking our faith only works where we're the ones in charge and on top. That's not Christianity, it's the religion of the slaveholder.

True resurrection faith has always been found among those at the margins. Which brings me to John chapter 1. The disciples have witnessed their teacher, their rabbi, executed by the state.

They've heard rumors that he's alive again. They've even seen him twice. But they don't know what to do next. So, what do they do? They go fishing. It almost sounds absurd.

After everything they've been through, after witnessing execution and resurrection, they go back to work. Peter says, I'm going fishing, and the others say, we'll go with you.

[11 : 29] It's so painfully mundane. After the cosmic drama of resurrection, they return to their boats, their nets, their labor.

Maybe because they just needed to eat. Maybe because Judas, who was their money keeper, is dead, and they don't know where the money is. Maybe because routine offers comfort when everything else has been shattered.

So, they fish all night, they catch nothing. This is what it says, John 21. Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias.

This is how it happened. Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathaniel from Cana and Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two others were together. Simon told them, I'm going fishing.

They said, we'll go with you. So, they set out on a boat. Throughout the night, they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't realize it was Jesus. And Jesus calls to them, children, have you caught anything to eat?

[12 : 30] They answered him, no. He said, cast, the Greek word here is ballo. I always remember this in my Greek classes by ballo, sounds like ball, and you throw or cast a ball.

Okay, now you know a Greek word. Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some. So, they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net. And then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, it's the Lord.

So, we'll pause there. So, at daybreak, a figure calls from the shore, cast your net on the opposite, the wrong side of the boat. They do. Their nets are so full, they can barely haul them in.

And that's when they recognize Jesus. It's the abundance, the miracle, the mundane miracle of just a net full of fish that makes them recognize their Lord.

And there's this one detail in the story that always wrecks me emotionally. There's like this sort of classical musical cantata that I listen to every year. Puts this verse to music and it just like, one of the few things that can get me to weep.

[13 : 34] It says, when Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself for he was naked and jumped into the water. Actually, this is one of the few times I like the way the King James Version puts it.

Peter realizes it's Jesus and King James reads, he casts himself into the sea. He follows himself into the sea. Cast, you're not on the other side. Peter casts himself into the sea.

He doesn't wait for the boat to row itself to shore. He plunges into the water to get to Jesus faster. In verse 8, the other disciples followed in the boat dragging the net full of fish, which I love the comedy of the scene of like, Peter, what the heck?

When they landed, they saw a fire there with fish on it and some bread. And Jesus said to them, bring some of the fish that you've just caught. So Simon Peter gets up, pulls the net to shore, so he's got something to prove.

Okay. It was full of large fish, 153 of them, but the net hadn't even torn, even with so many fish. Jesus says to them, come and have breakfast. None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, who are you?

[14 : 42] Because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them. And he did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Now consider what Peter is carrying sort of in his soul emotionally at this moment. The last time that we're told that he's around a fire like this one that Jesus prepared on the beach, he was denying that he ever knew Jesus.

In the night of Jesus' trial, he's gathered around a fire outside the court where Jesus is being tried. He's asked three times, do you know this man? No, I don't even know him.

Now he's back by a fire again. The last time he tried to walk on water towards Jesus, he sank. Peter has every reason to hang back in shame, but instead he leaps unembellished, unashamed, without hesitation.

And when they all arrive on shore soaking wet and dragging their impossible catch, what does the resurrected Lord of the universe do? He makes them breakfast. No shaming, no where were you, where you crucified me, were you there when they crucified me, none of that.

[15 : 57] No grand theological discourse, just fish and bread over a charcoal fire. The resurrection, Christianity's greatest miracles, the big bang of the new creation, the cosmic victory over death itself is celebrated with breakfast.

Hallelujah. Not every leap of faith ends in failure. Sometimes when we cast ourselves into unknown waters, we might just find Jesus waiting for us on the shore.

Consider the story of Sarah Breedlove, better known as Madam C.J. Walker. Born to formerly enslaved parents shortly after the Civil War, she was orphaned by the age of seven and worked as a domestic servant by age ten.

As a young widow with a daughter's support, she struggled with hair loss to distress and scalp disease, a humiliation as a woman and a black woman. So in 1905, with just \$1.50 to her name, Walker abandoned her stable job as a washerwoman to develop and sell her own hair care products for black women.

Everybody told her she was crazy. Her family and her peers believed she was throwing away security for an impossible dream. But Walker had experienced a vision that guided her forward.

[17 : 13] She experimented and persisted and eventually created a wonderful hair grower. Her leap transformed not just her life, but created opportunities for thousands of others. Walker became America's self-made female millionaire and employed over 40,000 Walker agents, primarily black women who gained financial independence.

and she became a major philanthropist and activist. Walker cast herself into a sea of uncertainty and on the other shore she found abundance that blessed not just her, but her entire community.

Five years ago, my family and I took our own leap. We cast ourselves into the sea and moved here to D.C. As we said back when we said yes, we went scared.

Here's actually what I wrote to the search committee when we said yes two weeks later after they offered us the job. I wrote, it's been quite a week for Emily and me. I'll be completely honest.

When I applied for this job, I never expected an interview, much less a job offer. We didn't think moving our family out of the Midwest was something we wanted. To be even more honest, I'm still not convinced it is.

[18 : 22] And yet, we have never shaken this feeling that the table and the parrots were too much on the same page to walk away from each other. So here we are. I continue to write.

Emily and I recently encountered the phrase going scared from Jill Briscoe. It's this idea that God calls us to things that we didn't expect and are dramatically outside of our comfort zone.

And that God doesn't miraculously take the fear away. God instead gives us the courage to go scared. So after days of prayer and hours of conversation and many tears and quite a few skipped meals, we've decided to, if you'll take us, go scared, trusting that God has us in good hands.

Therefore, I'm ready and excited to accept this position pending the approval of the counteroffer listed below. You got to give the counteroffer.

It's just good career advice. We had no prior connections here. We did not intend on ending up on the East Coast or in D.C.

[19 : 33] It was a journey for Emily and I and our family into the complete unknown. And then, within two weeks of moving here, the COVID pandemic hit. And it felt like we had just made the biggest mistake of our lives, that we had left our community and our church behind to a group of people that we didn't know and to a city that we weren't familiar with just in time for lockdown.

Two weeks to flatten the curve. The last thing I wanted to be was a digital pastor preaching to a camera instead of to real people. I thought that I had just cast myself into a sea of failure.

But now, five years later, we are so blessed to be here. My kids are thriving. My wife and I, we have jobs that we love and coworkers that we love.

We found friends that we cherish as family. I can pastor in a way that's true to who I am and my beliefs. What seemed like a stupid belly flop turned out to be a journey towards Jesus.

I didn't know that he was waiting on the shore, but he did. Remember, Peter and Jesus and the disciples' breakfast, it happens under occupation.

[20 : 48] Rome still rules. The powers that executed Jesus are just around the corner. The disciples are still a marginalized religious minority with no institutional power. And yet, here in this humble meal on the beach, we see what resurrection looks like under empire.

Abundant provision when resources seem scarce. Community when isolation seems safer. Forgiveness when shame would keep us distant. Nourishment for the journey ahead.

The disciples don't overthrow Rome that day. They don't march on Jerusalem with swords drawn. They eat breakfast. They're restored to community. They are fed.

That's how resurrection worked then, and it's how it works now. Not primarily through dramatic displays of power. Peter doesn't walk on the water towards Jesus. He swims like a normal human being.

But through the quiet rebellion of communion and mutual care and shameless love, resurrection power is made known. So what does this tell us about resurrection faith in turbulent times?

[21 : 55] First, even in empire, we still need to eat. We still need community. We still need work that sustains us. Resurrection does not exempt us from the daily needs of being human.

Secondly, abundance is how we recognize Jesus. When the disciples' nets are suddenly and possibly full, John says, it's the Lord. The impossible provision, the overflowing catch, the just enough, just in time, that is what helps them to see who is really present.

Third, and most importantly, when the world is burning, we cast ourselves into the sea. Peter doesn't wait for perfect understanding. He doesn't wait until he's no longer ashamed.

He doesn't even wait for the boat to reach the shore. He leaps into the water and he makes his way to Jesus. I'm not here to prove the resurrection to any of you.

I'm not offering apologetics today, but I am suggesting the resurrection faith means casting ourselves towards Jesus, even, especially, when everything seems to be falling apart.

[23 : 07] The earliest Christians didn't just believe in the resurrection. They lived as if death had been defeated. They shared everything they had. They cared for the poor and the marginalized.

They welcomed the stranger. They visited the imprisoned. They made resurrection true by being resurrection people. When we provide for one another's needs, when we practice mutual aid, when we advocate for those who are disappeared by our government, when we stand against empire and oppression, we too are casting ourselves into the sea.

We are swimming towards Jesus who waits on the shore with breakfast ready. The miraculous catch in John 21, too many fish to haul in, reminds me that God's provision is always more than we can contain.

And like those disciples who are invited to bring what we've caught to the fire where Jesus already has fish cooking, our work combines with God's work. Our small provisions join with God's abundance.

I can't tell you why God allows empires to persist, and I can't explain why the resurrection hasn't yet fully transformed our world. But I can tell you what I see in this story.

[24 : 20] A group of traumatized people going back to work, an impossible abundance that helps them recognize Jesus, a disciple who casts himself into the sea without shame, and a risen Lord who makes them breakfast.

If Christianity was born an empire, then perhaps it was made for times like these. Not because suffering is good, but because resurrection has always been God's answer to the systems of death.

So this Easter, in the face of authoritarianism and violence and despair, I invite you to cast yourself into the sea, to move towards Jesus without shame, to recognize him in the moments of unexpected abundance, to join him for breakfast on the shore, and then, fed and forgiven, we go back into the world to make resurrection true by the way we live.

Christ is risen. He has breakfast ready. Let's swim towards him together.