

142 Years & 153 Fish (FBC 142nd Church Anniversary)

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on April 27th, 2025 – John 21:1-14)

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For more than a century thousands of people have sat in the pews in which you now sit, and prayed and been encouraged to live out their faith in the Risen Christ in their daily lives. Over the last 142 years the people of this church have sought to serve this local community. They have been 'Good Samaritans' to the local community, branched out to surrounding suburbs and set up churches there, welcomed people from all corners of the globe – especially the Philippines, Iran and Burma, but countless other places too, they have served the aged and vulnerable in the community through connections to Westhaven and the Day Care Centre, they have shown the practical love of Jesus to those who have been homeless, hungry or needy.

In summary they (and that includes you) have been open to the local community in all its diversity as they have sought to share the inclusive love of God. They have practiced our vision or motto which says: *The Footscray Baptist Church celebrates the God-given diversity of cultures. We welcome you to join us in the journey of faith, whatever your race, religion, capability, gender or sexuality.* One hundred and forty-two years of celebrating the diversity of God's creation. It has done all this in response to, both an individual and a corporate encounter with the risen Christ.

In our gospel story today and the story from Acts we find the risen Christ encountering people going about their everyday lives. In the gospel story we have 7 people who have gone fishing. Peter, James and John (sons of Zebedee) all of whom were fishermen. Nathaniel, originally from the hill country in Cana, so I am not sure he was a fisherman, Thomas and two other unnamed disciples but one who is referred to as the one whom Jesus' loved. They had already seen the Risen Christ on at least one and for most of them on two occasions. Then, they were locked away from the world, because they were scared. Now they have left their bunker and gone back out into the world, back to that which most of them knew best – fishing.

Paul in the other story was going about his business, nasty business – a zealot out to get rid of those who are followers of the way, that is, people just like the seven followers of the way who have gone fishing. He encounters the Risen Christ in the most dramatic way and is completely turned around, he changed his name from Saul to Paul and joins the followers of the way.

Back to those who have gone fishing. Experienced fishermen, although they have been preoccupied by other things for the last three years, go out fishing and catch nothing. After the night without any luck, they are called out to by a stranger on the shoreline, who suggests, they have another go and put their nets out on the other side of the boat. Why they follow his advice no one knows, but they do, and the haul of fish is huge – 153 in the net almost breaking it. Peter now recognises the one giving fishing advice, it is Jesus, who has begun to build a barbeque on the beach to cook them breakfast.

This is the third resurrection appearance of Jesus we find in John's gospel. After the women report an empty tomb, Jesus appears to the scared little band of disciples hiding in an upper room, then by the end of the week Thomas has joined them and Jesus again appears in the upper room. This time they have left their hideaway and at Peter's suggestion have gone fishing.

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I wonder what you notice in this story.
Let me share with you a couple of things I notice.

First, they have stopped hiding. They have moved beyond their fear and gone out and done something. Maybe they have returned to their former lives, but they are no longer hiding away.

Secondly, they are prepared to follow the advice of a stranger. They are perhaps open to new possibilities.

Thirdly, they do eventually recognise Jesus.

Fourthly, Peter puts on clothes and then jumps into the water. I find this curious, I guess I expect him to have done the opposite. What might this mean? Is putting on clothes a sign of not continuing as a fisherman, he no longer wears the clothes of a fisherman but has donned the clothes of his new life in Christ?

Fifthly, we are told two things about the great haul of fish. First that there are many – 153. Secondly, John tells us despite the huge number of fish the net doesn't break. What might this mean? Many say the imagery of many fish and the nets not breaking symbolises the church, the unity of the church despite its diversity.

Finally, we know they all go on to share the gospel and I include Paul in this as well. They are changed by their experience, they give up the fishing (for the second time for some of them) and spend their lives sharing the love of God and Jesus wherever they find themselves.

What might we learn from this story for our own discipleship, and for the next 142 years in the life of this church?

We need to have the courage of these disciples to go out into the world and share the message of the Resurrection. We need to take risks and not remain hidden away inside the sanctuary. We need to do something, anything and see what happens next.

We need to allow ourselves to be changed by our encounter with the Risen Christ, to turn our lives upside down if necessary. To turn around and go down a different path as Paul did.

Perhaps we need to think about where we cast our nets. Perhaps we need to try to fish in other places. We need to be attuned to what and where Jesus might be calling us.

We must always be ready to reclothe ourselves in Christ. To reclothe ourselves in love, in forgiveness, in compassion.

We must continue to celebrate the unity and diversity of the church, as this church has done for more than a century. The kingdom of God is incredibly diverse and that is its beauty, but we must also work to ensure it remains unified. That doesn't mean sameness, rather it means difference held together in love.

Once we have encountered Jesus there really is not turning back, Paul learnt that, and the seven disciples learnt that too. Despite going back to fishing or trying to eliminate

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the ‘followers of the way’ none of them remained indifferent, the meeting of Jesus changed them and their focus in life.

They all ventured out again, so must we. Amen.