

## “The First Prayer”

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Easter 3



*New Moon #2*

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### Readings

John 21:1-6

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Once again, Jesus appeared again to the disciples, this time at the Tiberias Sea (the Sea of Galilee). This is how he did it: Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed “Twin”), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the brothers Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. Simon Peter announced, “I’m going fishing.”

The rest of them replied, “We’re going with you.” They went out and got in the boat. They caught nothing that night. When the sun came up, Jesus was standing on the beach, but they didn’t recognize him.

Jesus spoke to them: “Good morning! Did you catch anything for breakfast?”

They answered, “No.”

He said, “Throw the net off the right side of the boat and see what happens.”

They did what he said. All of a sudden there were so many fish in it, they weren’t strong enough to pull it in.

“Faith”

a poem by David Whyte in *David Whyte: Essentials*

I want to write about faith,  
about the way the moon rises  
over cold snow, night after night,  
faithful even as it fades from fullness,  
slowly becoming that last curving and impossible  
sliver of light before the final darkness.

But I have no faith myself  
I refuse even the smallest entry.

Let this then, my small poem,  
like a new moon, slender and barely open,  
be the first prayer that opens me to faith.

So here we are, in the glow of Easter. We have recognized resurrection in its many expressions. We have experienced the hopefulness of new life all around us in the celebration of Mother Earth. We move through this season of burgeoning growth and increasing light, sensing that we've arrived at some sort of destination. We've told the story of the empty tomb as if it's the final chapter in an epic drama. Death has been conquered, and wasn't that all we really needed, after all? Isn't that the point of the entire story of Jesus, an epic telling of death, burial, and rising again? There are numbers of Christian theologies that make this some sort of end point.

Certainly, this gospel portrait that we associate with the Apostle John is highly invested in showing that Jesus is a Divine Child of God in ways that we are not, and that his death and resurrection place him in a completely different category from any other human being. Some of these writings are likely a century or two removed from the events they portray, and as oral traditions go, they get retold and retold and retold, until someone writes them down. By then, no one is left to question them, and as the Jewish people scattered following the destruction of Jerusalem in the decades after the crucifixion, the stories became their connective tissue, their means of hanging on to one another, to their heritage, and to their messianic hope.

In the art of memoir, we're told to exercise a certain caution in our story-telling, for the way we tell the story is the way we will remember it. It's not a fabrication, and certainly not intentional, but each of us will inhabit the story in new ways. I can tell you a story about something that happened fifty years ago, and someone else who was in the same room will tell it very differently.

We live in a dynamic and creative universe that operates in specific ways. Our understanding of that universe changes from day to day, from year to year. Brain science, quantum physics, and epigenetics are just a few of the green growing edges of human endeavor. A day will come when they will seem elemental, as humans evolve in awareness and understanding. So from this vantage point, when we encounter a gospel lesson like this one today, its value for us is as much in what we bring to it as what we take from it.

Peter, Nathaniel, James, John, and a few others set out in a boat at night to catch some fish. The plan was to provide their next morning's breakfast, but by dawn, they had nary a fish to show for it. Enter some unknown man on the beach who called to them, asking if they had caught anything. Dejectedly, they offered their answer, and he told them to try casting their nets on the other side of the boat. Duh! Silly as it seemed, and with little to no faith in the outcome—perhaps just to prove the guy on the beach to be wrong—they did it.

Of course, it was the risen Jesus on the beach. That's the point of the story. Of course they caught so many fish they couldn't begin to pull them in. Other gospels tell this same story, but much earlier, as these skeptical fishermen are just getting to know this strange young rabbi. It is a way of connecting this post-resurrection Jesus with the earlier one. In John, the story goes on to have the incognito Jesus on the beach cooking the fishermen's breakfast when they suddenly have this flash of recognition. Today's gospel reading stops before that, however, and I think it helps us to focus on the point of the story, on what is here for us to learn from nineteen or so centuries later.

As with these rather hapless apostles, our best-laid plans may not always work out. This is a fact of life for all of us, when our "effort-ing" does not produce the results we were expecting. I can lose my car keys in my apartment and go searching for them all day long, and Tripp might say, "Did you look in that drawer?" Perhaps I'll get exasperated and say, "Of course I did!" Then I'll open the drawer and see my keys, in the exact place I had not seen them before. The more wound up I got in the story of my keys being lost, the more impossible it was for me to see them. There are times when life is just that way. This is the essence of faith, or the ability to see things we've always looked at, but never seen.

As reflectors of Divine Image, we humans are creators at our core, whether we recognize it or not. And we make decisions much like our first-century counterparts. "Let's try this and see if it works." And when our efforts don't produce the results we hope for, we lose heart, or perhaps our faith wavers and we get to a place where we think we're too broken to create anything of value to ourselves or to others.

David Whyte confesses that this is who he is, when he offers this little poem entitled simply "Faith." As I encountered this piece recently, I received it not just as Whyte's own confession, but as my own as well. And after we mulled it over in Stone Soup this week, I'd have to say that it's probably just the common human confession. Faith is not a default condition. Neither is doubt, really, but I'd have to say that if I lean in one direction or another, doubt comes a bit more easily.

Faith, David Whyte says, is like this moon that rises every night, shedding light in the night sky, illuminating the darkness to all its varying degrees, waxing, full, then waning. But there comes that moment of new moon, where there seems to be no light at all. Perhaps we cannot see a single ray of hope. All seems lost. Nothing seems to flow. That's when this "small poem" becomes his tiny little prayer, a pinhole of an opening that lets in the faint beginnings of light. It's when he has no faith at all that faith can truly begin.

I often wonder at all the things I think I know, all the conclusions I've drawn, all the assumptions I've made in my life. I've decided many times that the fish are only found on one side of the boat. That's where they've been before. Anyone with my experience would see my life in the same way. But when life does not happen in that way, when what I thought I knew to be true has been shaken, and my confident predictions all come to nothing, my faith can shrink just like the waning moon.

It is not lost on me that yesterday was a new moon, added to a solar eclipse. You may or may not see any significance in that. For me it is at the very least an apt metaphor. During this new moon, let us join together and find the little prayer that opens us to a true faith. In this seeming darkness that is our world right now is a pinhole of light, a slight beginning of consciousness, that "first prayer" that opens us to faith. Today let us pray that first prayer once again.

