

Easter — The Extra Scenes?

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Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. — Henry James¹

How can a Gospel possibly come to a close? — Beverly Roberts Gaventa²

The Curious Case of John 21

Making its rare appearance in the Easter season lectionary this year is the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of John, or at least the first nineteen verses of it. Like a periodic comet, John 21 orbits around only once every three years in the lectionary. Even then, despite the fact that it is a lavishly rich Easter text, it plays a lesser role, having to wait patiently until the third Sunday of the season to appear. By contrast, the previous chapter of John gets most favored treatment. John 20, which contains the well-known stories of the risen Jesus encountering a weeping Mary Magdalene, the fearful disciples, and a not-yet-believing Thomas, gets served up by the lectionary for reading and preaching every single Easter. Some of the stories in John 20 even make it twice a year, both in the season of Easter and on Pentecost.

The lectionary here is not so much giving short shrift to a magnificent chapter of scripture as it is reflecting a conundrum of New Testament scholarship and something that I think can become an interesting conundrum for preachers, too: what exactly should we do with John 21? On the one hand, contemporary New Testament scholars agree almost unanimously that John 21 is something of an add-on to the original Gospel. When the author of John gets to the end of chapter 20, he leans out over the page and begins to make “I’m finished here” sounds:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.
(Jn 20:30-31)

That seems for all the world like a writer who is lowering the blinds and closing up shop. The music begins to play, and we expect “The End” to scroll across the screen. Because John 20 comes to such an apparently firm and definitive conclusion, John 21 seems like the “Extra Features” or even the “Deleted Scenes” on a movie DVD, more of a curiosity and an afterthought than a narrative necessity. Thus, biblical commentators often call John 21 a “postscript,” an “appendix,” or an “epilogue,” and most of them view this chapter as the work of another author,³ someone who added supplemental material to John’s Gospel for whatever reasons. Small wonder, then, that we encounter it only once every three years.

On the other hand, here is a curiosity: if John 21 were really no more than an

appendix, a later addition tacked onto John's Gospel, we would expect to find unmistakable signs of another and different authorial style (perhaps like the stern parental voice that suddenly interrupts the rebellious iconoclasm of Qoheleth at the end of Ecclesiastes saying, "OK, that's enough!"), and somewhere we would have expected to unearth an ancient manuscript or two of John minus the appendix. But no, the vocabulary, theological perspective, and worldview of John 21 is remarkably congruent with John 1-20, and a shorter Greek manuscript of John has never been uncovered. The evidence seems to say that John's Gospel never circulated without chapter 21 snugly attached.

So what gives here? Is John 21 an "extra feature" or not? And more important, what difference does it make for the preacher? Many biblical scholars say, in effect,

Look, face it, John 21 is an epilogue, an add-on. The original Gospel of John ended quite nicely at chapter 20, and chapter 21 was glued on later for whatever ecclesial or theological purposes. Trying to force some narrative unity here is fruitless. For goodness sake, the disciples, who have proclaimed in chapter 20, "We have seen the Lord," appear to have forgotten all about that in chapter 21 and don't even recognize Jesus. The fact that John 21 sounds so much like the rest of John is no real mystery. The author of John 21 was a student of the Fourth Evangelist, was embedded in the Johannine circle, and was, therefore, steeped in that language and worldview. He sounds a lot like the rest of John for approximately the same reasons that Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs sound a lot like Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys.

However, at least one biblical scholar, Paul Minear, has forcefully (if not persuasively) argued that the idea that John 21 is some kind of later appendix is all wet. John 21, he says, was the original ending of the Gospel all along, was therefore written by the same author, and the Fourth Gospel would be incomplete without chapter 21. That's why we never find an ancient manuscript of John that ends at chapter 20. The Gospel never ended there. The apparent finale in chapter 20, Minear claims, was simply the ending to *that* chapter, and John 1-21 displays an essential narrative flow and unity. Without John 21, how would we know, for example, what happened to two of the main characters of John's Gospel, Peter and the beloved disciple? Minear finds it highly unlikely that the author would develop such a strong portrait of these two key disciples, only to allow them to float away indeterminately, as they seem to do in John 20.⁴

Another Possibility

There is a third option here – and now I think I am getting down to homiletical pay dirt. This third alternative involves, first, recognizing that the scholarly consensus is correct. Historically, John 21 was appended to the original Gospel and was written by another hand. This third option involves taking seriously the fact that, literarily and canonically, the Gospel of John has essentially always included chapter 21, and the Fourth Gospel should be read and interpreted accordingly in the church. In other words, we acknowledge that John 21 may not have been a part of the original Gospel, but that it is a crucial element in *our* Gospel of John, the church's Gospel of John.

In a fascinating essay, “John 21 and the Problem of Narrative Closure,” Beverly Roberts Gaventa pursues this third option by setting aside (for purposes of analysis) questions about source and authorship and focusing instead on the Gospel of John as we have it in the present canon. “[W]hatever the history of the material in chapter 21,” she says, “it now constitutes the ending of the Gospel, and, as such, it merits attention.”⁵ When the Gospel of John is viewed as a single literary unit, chapter 21 is not seen as an epilogue or appendix, tacked on to the “pure” original. Rather, John 20 and 21, Gaventa states, “might better be understood as two separate endings, relatively independent of one another, each of which brings the Gospel to a kind of closure.”⁶ As a piece of literature, then, John’s Gospel is like the play *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* or the movie *Sliding Doors*, a story with more than one ending.

But why would a Gospel need more than one ending? Gaventa takes up this question, and things get really interesting. Gaventa first invites us to think about how stories typically begin and end. Stories get going when something *happens*. Life as normal, life as static routine, life at rest does not a story make. Stories begin, in fact, when the status quo is disturbed. The bad guys ride into town with pistols blazing and rob the local bank, a leading screen actress is found mysteriously dead in a cheap Hollywood motel, the wine runs out at a Cana wedding reception, a child disappears in a crowd, a stranger shows up and someone says, “Here is the one we’ve been waiting for, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Now, something has happened, and a story gets going. “In order for narrative to occur...,” Gaventa says, “something must happen that, to one degree or another, disrupts things as they are.”

If stories begin when something is disrupted, they often end by the quelling of that disruption, by the return of life to peaceful rest. The bad guys are finished off at the O.K. Corral, the actress’s murderer is caught and imprisoned, the water is turned into delightful wine, the child is found and returned to relieved parents, and the crucified Lamb of God is resurrected and vindicated. The End. The houselights come up; we can put our empty popcorn boxes on the floor and leave the theater. The beginning of a story breaks the circle; the end of the story closes the circle again.

But notice that there is an artificiality to this closing of the circle, to this return to stability. Real life is not like that. Nothing is ever really at rest. The circular ending of a story, then, is a kind of welcome fiction, but a fiction nevertheless. It is deeply satisfying to get to the end of a detective novel or a romantic comedy and have the sense that closure has been achieved – the crime has been solved, the couple has found true love — partly because we have to live in a world of constant disruption where closure never really happens. Gaventa quotes literary critic Barbara Herrnstein Smith to the effect that closure in narratives “allows the reader to be satisfied by the failure of continuation or, put another way, it creates in the reader the expectation of nothing.”

There’s the key – the expectation of nothing. Certain kinds of stories come to an end when we have the sense that nothing else needs to happen. The story is over, done, finished. If we only had John 20 as an ending, Gaventa argues, we might get the wrong impression that the Gospel is one of those stories that is finished on the last page, one that comes to a static conclusion. By itself, John 20 is a kind of circular ending, she says, because it “takes readers back to the Gospel’s prologue, completing the circle begun there by the appearance of the Logos.”⁷ In the beginning of the story, Jesus descended from the Father, and now at the end he returns, ascending to the Father (20:17). In the beginning of the story, the reader was told that Jesus came so that “all

might believe,” and now at the end of the story, the mission is accomplished as Mary, the disciples, the reluctant Thomas, and countless others, including presumably the reader, all “believe.” Roll the credits. The Jesus story has come to a happy ending. Nothing else needs to happen.

But, of course, to imagine the story of Jesus as finished, as a completed circle, as a narrative that ends with “the expectation of nothing” is to grievously misunderstand the gospel. Such a view, says Gaventa, “does not and cannot do justice to the ongoing, never-ending character of the disruption created by the descent of Jesus from the Father.”⁸

And that brings us to the power of the second and parallel ending of John’s Gospel in chapter 21. If chapter 20 provides a kind of closure, chapter 21 is “anti-closure,”⁹ an alternative ending (or rather non-ending) that sits in a tense relationship with chapter 20 and makes it clear that the Easter events narrated in John 20 do not conclude the Jesus story at all, but instead throw believers into an open future, into a world perpetually disrupted by the presence of the risen Christ. Rather than a story with the illusion of an ending in which the bow has been neatly tied and nothing else needs to happen, the Jesus story never ends, and the truly surprising and astounded can be expected at every bend in the road.

John 21 Revisited

In this light, seeing John 21 as an anti-closure ending to the Gospel, we can look with new eyes at the episodes in the chapter:

1. *Night Fishing* (21:1-14). As John 20 came to an end, we were in a house in Jerusalem, but now we have suddenly been transported back to Galilee, where it all began. The risen Jesus is once again with a group of his disciples by the Sea of Galilee (Tiberias). The last time we were here, the reader is prompted to remember, was back in John 6, when Jesus disrupted history and overturned all reasonable expectation by feeding an enormously large multitude with a tiny supply of bread and fish.

Who is present at this seaside reunion? Simon Peter, whose relationship to the resurrection was left off rather ambiguously in chapter 20. Thomas, who had his own struggles with the Easter truth. Nathanael, who hasn’t been mentioned since way back in chapter 1, when he was promised by Jesus that he would see “greater things.” And finally, the sons of Zebedee (making their first appearance by name in John’s Gospel), and two unnamed disciples (we find out later in the chapter that the “beloved disciple” is in the group, and some commentators speculate that this disciple, who is consistently unnamed in the Gospel, would probably have been one of this unnamed pair).¹⁰

What happened? The text says that Jesus “showed himself again,” and the language is important. This isn’t just a conversation going on between Jesus and his disciples; this is going to be a “showing” of himself, a revelation, an epiphany. The term for “showed” (*phanroun*) is an important one in John, appearing nine times and referring in each case to a disclosure of God’s action in earthly events.¹¹ The same verb is used, for example, of the miracle at Cana (2:11 – “Jesus...*revealed* his glory...”) and of the man born blind (9:3 – “He was born blind so that God’s works might be *revealed* in him.”), but this time, the revelation happens, the author informs us, in a fishing story.

In the midst of the gathering, Peter suddenly makes a seemingly improbable announcement: “I am going fishing.” *Fishing*? Odd as it may seem, the other disciples seem to like the idea and go with him. Commentators cannot make up their minds

whether Peter is saying, in effect, “To heck with it. My job as a disciple is over. I’m going back to my old life as a fisherman,” or whether he is symbolically declaring his intention to perform ministry, going on a fishing venture for the kingdom. It hardly matters, though, since whether Peter is headed toward the bait shop or the seminary, he is as yet unengaged by the power and possibility of the resurrection.

In short, Peter and the others are heading off to do work without hope, fishing in an empty lake. He is like the parishioner who steadily comes to church, who sings the hymns and prays the prayers and marches through the ritual, but who expects nothing holy to happen today. He is like the woman who puts her time in at the office but cannot imagine that what she does would bear meaningful fruit or that she could count in any eternal sense. In the parallel story in Luke (5:1-11), the disciples have also been night fishing, but here in the Gospel of John, with its highly developed symbolism of light and darkness, the disciples are not just doing night fishing; they are fishing at *night*,¹² the godforsaken night from which Nicodemus emerged (3:2) and into which Judas slithered (13:30). To draw on our earlier discussion of narrative, these disciples are caught in a story that has already ended, and they have the “expectation of nothing.” And nothing is what they get; “that night they caught nothing” (21:3).

But John 21 disrupts all prematurely closed life stories with the presence of the risen Christ, who opens us to a never-ending kingdom future. “Children,” says Jesus, “you have no fish, have you? Well, cast your net in that direction, in the direction of God’s future.” And when they did, the nets turned from empty to bursting with abundance.

This is an Easter moment that forms not closure, not the end of the narrative, but continual openness to the surprises of God and constant watchfulness and hope. How did Jesus “show himself” in this fishing story? It was not the revelation that he could perform a wonder about a catch of fish. It was, rather, that he is Lord over an Easter-shaped world of constant newness that the powers of hopelessness and death no longer rule. In a world where the risen Christ is present, the future is arced toward God and things happen. Who knows when a long and seemingly wasted night is but a prelude to a morning of abundance, when a dark world may be suddenly invaded by the bright and joyful light of Easter? This is a world where the feeding of the multitudes with bread and fish is no one-time miracle, but the ceaseless action of a generous Christ, who graciously allows us to drop our net into the sea and participate in the abundance and kindness of God. Such a world requires discernment and action. We have to be able to see the risen Lord standing on the shoreline of our lives and to act in response. In this fishing story, the beloved disciple symbolizes the discernment (“It is the Lord!” he cries to Peter), and the action is symbolized by Peter, who jumps into the sea and swims to shore.

In sum, John 21 has thrown the switch that sets the narrative into action again, reminding us that Easter is a story that never ends, that we, like the disciples dragging the bursting net of fish toward Jesus, are perpetually moving, in Alison Jack’s apt words, “from ignorance to knowledge, from distance to closeness, from the threatening chaos of the water to the solid ground, from darkness to light.”¹³

2. *Leaning Toward Love* (21:15-19). “When they had gone ashore,” the author of John 21 says, “they saw a charcoal fire,” and because the narrator puts it that way, we see it too. And because our attention is directed to the charcoal fire, we cannot help but remember an earlier charcoal fire in the Gospel of John, the one that Peter stood by,

warming himself, even as he denied three times his relationship to Jesus (18:18).

At this point in John 21, Peter is interrogated three times about his love for Jesus, and three times he affirms this love: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” At first, this encounter seems to be a matter of balancing the books. Three denials, three affirmations of love, account settled. But this exchange between Jesus and Peter is far more than a matter of closure, a completing of the narrative circle, a tying up of loose ends, a mere restoration of a broken relationship to an earlier state. John 21, as we have been saying, is anti-closure, and in this story, too, it does its work of disruption.

When Peter denied Jesus, this was far more than an act of cowardice, a breaking of the relationship of trust. Peter denied that he was a disciple, denied that he was with Jesus, in effect denied that he was a part of the story of Jesus. “Wherever this Jesus story was in the past, I was never in it; wherever this Jesus story is going in the future, I am not a part of it.” Because Peter disavows his past with Jesus, he cuts himself off from Jesus’ future.

This is why the three-fold exchange between Jesus and Peter is far more than a repair of a breach. Yes, Peter is restored and forgiven by Jesus, but he is also incorporated into Jesus’ future: “Feed my lambs...tend my sheep,” Jesus says, pointing toward the future. When Peter jumped into the water and swam to shore, he was not merely going from boat to land; he was swimming from the old world of closed loops and broken promises into the Easter world of perpetual hope and never-ending renewal. When Jesus asked Peter if he loved him “more than these,” it was not a question about affection, but of citizenship. “Peter, which charcoal fire do you choose? Which world do you truly love? Do you love the world dominated by tyrants, fear, and death, or do you love the world disclosed by Easter where death, fear, and tyranny have been vanquished? Which do you love?”

Peter is being offered forgiveness, but not just the forgiveness of a friend who is willing to give a betrayer a second chance, but forgiveness flowing from the power of the risen Christ, who is willing to restore Peter’s future. Thus, this episode does not end with Jesus shaking Peter’s hand and saying, “Let’s let bygones be bygones,” but instead with Jesus heading off on the path carved out by resurrection hope and mission, beckoning Peter, “Follow me” (21:19).

An Archive of Excess

John 21 ends not with closure, but with astonishing abundance. The author tells us that Jesus did so many things that, were all of them to be recorded, “the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25). In his *Scandal of the Gospel*, David McCracken names this claim by the narrator, this assertion that the Jesus story is so full that it would spill out of libraries and warehouses and even the Grand Canyon, beyond the confines of the world into the vastness of space, “an archive of excess.”¹⁴

Gaventa says that this term – “archive of excess” – is actually an apt description of the whole of John 21. The disciples did not catch only small fish, but large ones, and not just a few, but 153 of them! Normally nets would break under such a load, but not in John 21; on the other side of Easter, the net holds strong. Jesus has a breakfast of fish waiting, even before the disciples come to shore with the catch, and bread that materializes from...where? The bread of heaven? In other words, this is a narrative of excess, a story of an Easter Jesus who will not allow the narrative of God and the world

to come to an artificial, status quo ending, a Jesus who keeps calling, and feeding, and loving, and forgiving, and filling the world with wonder and grace, so much so that the world would run out of paper before it could all be written down. An archive of excess.

While I was working on this essay, my mother was quietly dying in hospice care. We gathered daily at her bedside, caressing her tenderly, telling her over and over of our love. We cracked jokes and retold old family stories. We sang hymns, prayed, and read psalms to her. She responded as best she could, smiling faintly at the stories and jokes, telling us she loved us, too, speaking in a soft, hoarse whisper, which was all the voice she had left after a hospital breathing tube had wounded her vocal cords.

Almost every day she would beckon one of us close to her face and mouth with the words, "I'm hungry." She had a feeding tube, and the nurses were giving her all of the broth and pureed food her frail and failing system could handle, but still she said, day after day, "I'm hungry." This was quite troubling to us, even though the hospice staff assured us that her body, which was gradually shutting down, could no longer feel ordinary physical hunger pangs. Once, near the end, I came into her room and found her restless.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Are you hungry?"

"Very," she whispered. I felt helpless, not knowing what to do. I tried to feed her some soft food; she took a few small bites and then shook her head. No more. Slowly it dawned on me. "I'm hungry" was her way of describing the totality of her circumstance. She was not asking for food; she was saying that everything was slipping away, her personal history was closing down, coming to an end. Her days of breath and food and light and family and the touch of love were ebbing, and she was hungry, hungry for more, hungry for the life being taken away from her...very hungry.

Early on a Thursday morning, the powers of death, as the old hymn puts it, did their worst, and she was gone. A week or so after her death and funeral, I tried to resume normal activities, and I went back to work on this essay, went back to John 21. Suddenly I saw there with new clarity – this time for my mother, this time for myself – what this gospel of "excess" is about. I saw the power and promise of this story that undermines closure, this gospel of unceasing abundance that will not allow itself to be resolved by returning to the world that once was. I saw that the reason why the world could not hold the books telling of Jesus' deeds is that Jesus keeps on doing them, doing them ceaselessly, doing them every day, doing them in our lives. I had stood beside my mother's grave "in sure and certain hope of the resurrection," but now I could see it more clearly, could see my mother plunging into the waters of death and coming up on that distant shore, where Jesus is waiting with a charcoal fire and fish and bread, waiting with the abundance of new life.

"Are you hungry?" I hear him saying.

"Very," my mother surely responded. "Very."

Notes

1 Henry James, "Preface," *Roderick Hudson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977 [1876]), xv, as cited in Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "John 21 and the Problem of Narrative Closure," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, edited by R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 240.

2 Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "John 21 and the Problem of Narrative Closure," 248.

3 Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon

Press, 1995), 854.

4 Paul S. Minear, "The Original Functions of John 21," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 102/1 (1983), esp. 90-91.

5 Gaventa, "John 21 and the Problem of Narrative Closure," 242.

6 *Ibid.*, 245.

7 *Ibid.*, 246.

8 *Ibid.*, 249.

9 *Ibid.*

10 O'Day, "The Gospel of John," 857.

11 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 29A (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1067.

12 R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 246.

13 Alison Jack, "The Intolerable Wrestle with Words and Meaning": John 21, T.S. Eliot and the Sense of an Ending," *Expository Times*, 117/12, 500.

14 David McCracken, *The Scandal of the Gospels: Jesus, Story, and Offense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 151.