

April 10, Third Sunday of Easter: John 21:1-19

by [Austin Shelley](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue

In a china cabinet in the corner of our dining room sits a coffee mug with a picture of a cardinal on it. The mug is not especially beautiful. Unlike other favorite mugs that nest just so into my cupped hands, this one's shape is odd and its handle worn thin. If *Antiques Roadshow* were to stop by for coffee, on a good day they might value the cardinal mug at ten cents, give or take a nickel for the sizable chip along the rim.

Yet this unappealing vessel graces our china cabinet, rather than helping to fill our garbage bin. That's because the mug holds more than coffee or tea. What steeps in the cardinal mug is story.

It once belonged to my mother-in-law, who treasured it before I did. Before that, it belonged in a set of six cardinal mugs, an incentive for selling wrapping paper or cookie dough or some similarly frivolous school fund-raising product. My husband Mark, then 12 years old, apparently had a knack for sales—or perhaps his big brown eyes and adorable dimples won over potential buyers. In any case, he bested his classmates' efforts and won the coveted prize.

The way his mother tells the story, she pulled up to the school just in time to see Mark sprinting toward her, arms clasped around the cardboard box of half a dozen cardinal mugs that he had already planned to give to her. And then she watched helplessly as he and the box and every one of those mugs crashed to the pavement. One mug survived with just a chip. As I unwrapped this gift from her before Mark and I married, she told its story. "He isn't perfect," she concluded. "Love him anyway."

As we encounter the post-resurrection Jesus in this week's Gospel reading, the cardinal mug lends a fitting image. Brokenness and disappointment permeate this narrative—brokenness as thick as the early morning mist off the Sea of Galilee, disappointment as pungent as the smell of fish on the fire. Shattered dreams linger of a triumphant messiah who would liberate his people from Roman occupation. Nothing has gone the way the disciples intended. Judas's enthusiasm erupted into betrayal; Peter's devotion disintegrated into denial. Jesus' body, first broken on the cross, goes missing from the tomb and then reappears—resurrected but wounded

still.

Scholars typically find fault with Peter's exasperated decision to go fishing. But one can hardly blame the impetuous disciple for responding to confusing circumstances by grasping for solid ground. What if Peter's instinct to go fishing is not an abandonment of Jesus' call but rather a desperate attempt to retrace his steps, to reenact the scene in which Jesus first called him to follow? In an effort to remedy his disoriented state, Peter reverts to an activity with a tangible, reliable outcome.

Except that fishing turns out to be less reliable than Peter remembers. And against the rhythm of empty nets cast into the sea, Jesus appears on the shoreline. Divine déjà vu ensues, as Jesus begins the miracle of gathering all the broken pieces to himself: a fishing net filled to overflowing, a drenched disciple, grilled fish, and broken bread. These echoes of Jesus' earlier miracles are not lost on the disciples. Being face to face with the risen Lord silences them.

The other disciples fade into the background as the focus of the narrative narrows to the conversation between the risen Jesus and Peter, whom Jesus addresses as "Simon son of John." It's hard to tell whether Jesus calls Peter by his original name—rather than calling him Peter, "the rock"—in order to highlight Peter's failure to claim Jesus rather than deny him. In any case, Peter's hurt is evident. His heartbreak is emphasized further by Jesus' three repetitions of the question, "Do you love me?" and Peter's increasingly emphatic replies.

But Jesus doesn't seem interested in erasing or fixing Peter's brokenness. Instead, a broken Jesus feeds a broken Peter and commissions him to respond by extending Jesus' sustenance to others: "Feed my sheep."

None of us escapes this life unbroken. Yet God sustains us and calls us to be about God's work. We are not perfect. God loves us anyway—not just in spite of our brokenness, but because of it.

It may seem sophomoric or sentimental to affirm that God treasures us, brokenness and all. But consider how hard this promise is to believe. We run to God with a net full of fish, with half a dozen cardinal mugs—our extended arms filled with hope that God will be pleased. We end up with scraped knees and skinned elbows, our sidewalks and shorelines covered in disappointment, our clothes dripping wet with the weight of sins and griefs long past.

The breakfast on the beach in John's Gospel compels us to believe that our compassionate God knows a thing or two about brokenness. It invites us to warm our aching muscles by the fire, to taste a morsel of fresh fish, and to imagine that the risen Jesus gathers up the remnant—the imperfect but salvageable offerings of our broken lives—and cherishes them. It reminds us that we are filled to the brim with the story of God.