



SIEBENQUELL

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**Reflection on John 21, 1-14**

# **The Yawning Emptiness**

**Part 1**

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SOURCE: R. MONNERJAHN 2010

I sat next to him, the Old Man, on the soft, sun-warmed sand, and looked at him. My teacher! My Master! My friend! And I felt my how my heart twitched and how tears sprang to my eyes which were neither wanted nor welcome. He would not be with us, with me, much longer. And I was filled with dread at the thought. Nobody had to explain to me what his departure would mean. The mere thought of this future without him allowed me to sense, no, to feel, the yawning emptiness that was waiting for me in a not too distant time.

The milky eyes without pupils looked out onto the water. His thin, shaky hand lovingly stroked over the sand. This hand, which could no longer hold a quill. This hand, which had laid down the quill despite our furious protests, because the stories which all the books and libraries in the world could not hold, could not be held fast by one single hand either. Sadness welled up in me and tears made me more blind than the Old Man. For with his departure, the last storyteller would die. And with the death of the last storyteller, the world would come to end, at least my world would.

Suddenly his hand was on my shoulder and with unsuspected strength, he pulled me close to himself so that my head rested upon his breast. »It helps«, he said.

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»Twice I sat on shore with him. And both times I felt the fear that both fills you and hollows you out at the same time. The horrible yawning emptiness. The first time on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias our stomachs were empty. The second time, it was our lives.«

I looked up and saw in his face what I had already heard in the beating of his heart, how the warm and precious memory was filling him. »He always took care of our unsatisfied hungers. And bread and fish were ever his favored tools to stem the tide of emptiness.«

»But I only know the one story about the sea«, I replied. »You never told us that you were with him twice at the Sea of Tiberias.«

He smiled wryly and said, »He loved to write twice for people before the abyss, be it in the dust of the Temple or in our lives. For this story the heart must first be receptive. When you someday truly understand what it means, you can add it to my stories.«

»What must I do in order to ready my heart for this tale?«, I asked cautiously, for we never were allowed to press the Old Man.

»Your heart is filled with the fear of the yawning emptiness. But you wrestle with it like an adult. You want to think it through, plan in advance, preempt it and get a grip on it. This way you will never see his face. You need to feel this yawning emptiness like a child. Your stomach must rumble, your face must sweat and your ones must tremble. You need to weep through nights until you can take it no longer and prefer the cold wetness of the darkness to the warm womb of painful musings. You need to live through long, dark hours of laborious distraction until your muscles scream like your heart, but still cannot drown out its cries. You must withstand the waves of frustration of a boat as empty as your life. You must get to know this yawning emptiness like a child. It must have you in its grasp. Then you will understand!« His blind eyes gazed upon horizons that mine could not perceive. He sighed. »Only after all this did we hear his voice again. Do you know what his first words to us were after the long silence of death?« His heart beat louder in my ears. »My children!« He breathed the words out, and it was like a prayer.

»Because you did not understand«, I asked.

»No, because we had approached and traversed life like children. On the shore we brought him what was truly in us, the hunger and the emptiness that we had lived through from the skin to the soul. It was no reproach. It was a kiss.« I wiped the tears from my cheek, but now they came from the Old Man.

»You fear the time after my death. I know your fear. I, too, have lost a beloved Master and teacher and friend. The memory of those days flow through my veins and my blood continually carries it back to my heart. And when we could no longer stand this yearning, we went fishing.«

»You went fishing!« I was incredulous. And somewhat amused.

The Old Man carried on. »Do not make fun of our fishing. What did we really know before we lived through that night? We had sown word-chaff into the air. What did we know of depth, of life? This night and the emptiness of our boat, which we could not fill despite all our efforts, made sure that the Word became flesh among us. This night spoke to us of life that is hidden in the depths but needs to be made visible. That which is immediately available to us is on the surface of life. Yet, that which we truly need for life, that which we need to draw into the boat of our life, that resides in the depths. It needs to

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be drawn out. Just like the fish of the sea, life is full and rich deep within us, but at first it remains invisible and beyond our reach.«

The Old Man was breathless. He wheezed. I trembled as I lay on his breast and his heart cramped with the weeping.

»I heard the howling of the wind and the stifled sobs of my brothers in that night. This boat, which could take in no fish, I saw with my own eyes, and these nets, which could contain no fish, I touched with my own hands. And before you hear, see and touch the yawning emptiness like a child, none of your thoughts about loss will become a word of life for you.«

»You must get to know life like a child. You have to do senseless things and face genuine feelings. You have to flounder around in the dark. You have to move through laborious, futile nights in your life, and then flee into mindless tasks to make life bearable, only to stand there with empty hands. If you do all that, you will hear the homeland of the heart in the words: My child.«

The hammering in my ears: was it his heart or mine? Yet, I sensed that consolation, not condemnation, lay in his words, just as they did back then on another shore with a different Master, teacher and friend.

»It is alright. It is alright!«, he said, and I felt how the tumult of his memories grew higher than the waves of that night so long ago, so unforgotten. »It is alright, because this night of emptiness will give way to a new day. And He, who gladly drew children to himself, waits on the other side of this night.«

(to be continued)

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