

**Introduction:**

- A. There's a curious thing about the Gospel of John. As an eyewitness, John tells us about the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He tells how he and Peter ran to the grave on Easter morning when Mary Magdalene rushed in to tell them, *"They've taken the Lord out of the tomb."* He tells how they found Jesus' graveclothes, but no Jesus. He tells how overjoyed the disciples were when Jesus appeared to them that evening, and how Jesus said, *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."*

He tells about Thomas—Doubting Thomas—who wasn't there that night and who said he wouldn't believe unless he could touch Jesus' wounds with his own hands. And he told how a week later, Jesus did appear again when Thomas could do just that. Thomas exclaimed, *"My Lord and my God."* Then Jesus told him, *"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

After that John sums up his whole book: *"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

The End. Well, no. That's the curious part. It's not the end. After such a stirring conclusion, there's another chapter. Why?

- B. Because there was unfinished business. It was the problem of Peter. Jesus had renamed Simon son of John *Peter*—Rock. At the Last Supper, when Jesus said all the disciples would fall away, Peter had vowed, *"Even if all fall away, I*

*will not.*” He’d said, “*Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death. I will lay down my life for you.*” But, of course, he didn’t. Just as Jesus predicted, three times he denied that he even *knew* Jesus. “*Aren’t you one of his disciples?*” “*I am not. I am not. I don’t know this man you are talking about!*” Luke says, “*Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter... And he went outside and wept bitterly.*” Oh, when he heard that the tomb was empty he ran all the way to see. And He was ecstatic when he saw Jesus alive. **But there was that unfinished business.**

- C. Disciples of Jesus fail him. We disciples have found innumerable ways to deny the Lord. It isn’t that we’ve stopped believing in him and we’re certainly glad to celebrate his resurrection. **But what about our failures?** I’d guess that many of us come this morning with secrets locked in the closets of our hearts; failures, denials, wanderings. That’s why John gives us this last chapter.
- D. The story happens more than a week after the resurrection. Jesus had instructed his disciples to meet him in Galilee, well north of Jerusalem, where most of the disciples were from and where much of Jesus’ life was spent. At least seven of the disciples were there, but they hadn’t seen Jesus. This is what happened: **Jn. 21:1-3...**

All night, casting big sodden nets out over the black water and drawing them slowly back and not a pint-sized perch to show for their work. Some fishermen! All that long, dark fish-less, empty-net night. Nada. That wasn’t just bad luck. That was a kind of miracle itself, a divine intervention, to set up an encounter with Jesus. God works like that, you know. Long, frustrating nights are often God’s set-up.

Then: **vv.4-6...** It's a curious thing that after Jesus' resurrection people often did not recognize him or his voice. Maybe the Lord was teaching them to recognize him in other ways. That's just what happened. It hit John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," *déjà vu!*

There had been another time, maybe three years before, when Jesus of Nazareth had been preaching along the shore of this very lake and the crowds had pressed in so close that he commandeered the fishing boat of Simon who was washing out his nets. He preached from the boat and when he was done he said to Simon,

*"Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."*

*Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. Lk 5:4-6*

Like I said, *déjà vu!*

**Vv.7-11...** Did you see Peter? Talk about over-eager!

Thrashing through the water. Then hopping back on the boat to pull in that net weighing hundreds of pounds. **But Peter had unfinished business with Jesus.**

**I. WHEN YOU KNOW THAT JESUS LIVES, NO MATTER WHAT YOU'VE DONE, GO TO BE WITH HIM.**

A. Imagine what that catch meant to Peter. It was quite literally a fresh start. Jesus took him right back to the beginning, where they'd started together. Out in Peter's boat, a fishless night and then a miraculous catch. And do you remember what Jesus said to Peter and his partners after that first catch? *"From now on you will fish for people."* I'm sure they thought about that this time, too.

So that catch a few days after the resurrection told Peter that Jesus was not finished with him. Nor is he finished with us. Our long dark fruitless nights are not telling us that we're washed up. Dawn is coming. Hang on to your nets! Jesus is nearer than you think.

B. That first time this miracle happened, as recorded in Luke 5, do you recall what Peter's reaction was? "*When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!'*" Peter was afraid of Jesus because there was no telling what a holy, miracle-working man like Jesus might do when he found out how sinful Peter was. **But the holy Son of God had said to the sinner, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people."** Hearing that Peter, James and John, "*pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.*" That's how it had all started. And now, here they were again.

Then, Peter had begged Jesus to go away but this time, despite his terrible failure, he can't get to Jesus quickly enough! Wouldn't you think he'd be the only one hanging back, head bowed, fiddling with the nets in the corner of the boat? Peter had spent a lot of time with Jesus and one thing he'd learned: **Jesus came to save sinners.** Jesus wasn't afraid to touch and to eat with bad people, with failures and outcasts. **Now here was Peter, like the lost sheep or the prodigal son, aching to be with Jesus because he knew Jesus would not turn him away!** Do you realize that?

*Weak and wounded sinner,  
Lost and left to die  
O, raise your head, for love is passing by  
Come to Jesus,  
Come to Jesus,  
Come to Jesus and live!*

Well, what happens next: **vv.12-14...**

## II. NO MATTER WHAT YOU'VE DONE, JESUS WANTS TO BE WITH YOU!

- A. This also has a kind of déjà vu feel about it, doesn't it? Like the Last Supper, but without the ominous aura of death. *“Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.”* This food, however, doesn't speak of Jesus' death but his resurrection. The fish became the church's symbol of his resurrection, because of this meal.

*Illus.:* Our friend, Dr. Greg Athnos, has studied in depth the Christian art found in the Roman catacombs, which gives vivid insight into the faith of Christians for our first 300 years. Quite often there are depictions of the Lord eating with his disciples. **About half of those have the bread and cup but all of them have bread and fish,** plus many other images of bread and fish.<sup>1</sup> The fish—*ichthys*—became the **symbol of our fellowship with the risen Christ**, as well as the Greek acronym of our faith: *Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior*. The early church often decorated their tombs with the fish, the symbol of fellowship with the risen Christ.

For Peter and the others, their last supper with Jesus had prepared them for his death for our sin, the new covenant in his blood. But this breakfast at dawn prepared them for a new life with the resurrected Lord!

- B. Again, think of what this breakfast meant to Peter and the other disciples with him. They'd all run away when Jesus was arrested. They'd all failed him in his darkest hour, yet here he is welcoming them to eat with him. And not only that, but **he serves them**. *He serves them!* Jesus wants to enjoy our company. To sit around the fire together, as it were. Jesus isn't mad at you. He doesn't want you to keep your distance. He loves you and he loves being with you.

(By the way, where did Jesus get the bread and fish he'd prepared??)

Yet there is still some unfinished business. **Vv.15-19...** Those three questions, of course, are not-so-subtle reminders of Peter's three denials. "*I don't know him,*" led to "*Do you love me?*"

### **III. NO MATTER WHAT YOU'VE DONE, WHAT MATTERS TO JESUS IS IF YOU LOVE HIM AND HIS FLOCK**

- A. They sat there, in the dawn's early light, and Jesus asked that unsettling question: "*Simon son of John, do you love me **more than these?***" *More than these other disciples love me?* Remember Peter's boasting, "*Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.*" **Do you still feel that way, Peter?** You don't have to be a disciple of Jesus very long before you realize that you're not all that reliable, not all that impressive or devoted. Let's drop the comparisons!
- B. You may know that in the original Greek two different words for love are used throughout this exchange. I don't think that is particularly significant. In English it might be like this: Jesus asks "*Do you love me?*" And Peter replies, "*Lord, you know there is no one dearer to me than you.*"
- C. Try to step into the heart of Peter hearing this question three times. **V.17** says that he "*was hurt because Jesus asked him a third time.*" It sounded, of course, as if Jesus doubted him. And who could blame him? But I don't think that was it. With each answer Peter was pushing a little deeper, remembering his bitter tears, his painful soul-searching. Jesus wasn't doubting Peter. **He was helping Peter.**

Sin and betrayal makes any sane person question whether in fact we *do* love the Lord. Jesus himself said, "*If you love me, keep my commands.*" But we didn't keep his

commands. We didn't take up our cross and follow him. We didn't stay true to him. How dare we say we love him?

I walked myself through these three questions this week. I've struggled with Jesus' question. In fact, that was what started this whole sermon series. *Do I really love Jesus?* And it came down to saying with Peter, "Yes, Lord, there is no one dearer to me than you. I do love you."

- D. Then there are Jesus' three similar responses—also surprises: "Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep." Peter had been a fisherman. Now he was a shepherd entrusted with God's flock. At the end of his first epistle, Peter says to me and church elders everywhere, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care... And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away." [1 Pet 5:1,4] **Every Christian needs a shepherd after Jesus' own heart.** This week, as every week, we elders in this church have sought to obey Jesus because we love him... and you, his flock.

What this means to you all, even if you're not called to be an elder, is that **if you love Jesus, love his people.** The Bible has no category for people who love Jesus but ignore his people, his church. Oh, I know that churches can be very difficult and that some ought to go out of business rather than carry on as they do. But Jesus' strongest, most repeated command is "Love one another." **If you love Jesus you must love his people.**

- E. In the last verses of this chapter, Jesus tells Peter something of the kind of death that awaited him. Then one more déjà vu moment. Matthew tells that when Jesus first met Peter he said, "Come, follow me." Now here twice Jesus tells Peter, "Follow me!" Even to certain death. "You must

*follow me.*” And so far as we know, neither Peter nor his companions ever fished for fish again.

When we come to Jesus we are always welcomed with open arms, no matter what our failures have been. All that Jesus wants to know is if we love him and if we’ll love his people. And then the finishing word to our unfinished business: “*Follow me!*”

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i Gregory Athnos, *The Art of the Roman Catacombs*, p.124