

The Third Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2022

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Risen Jesus: “Follow Me”

John 21:1–19

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

While hauling in a miraculous catch of fish, **the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment . . . and threw himself into the sea and swam to shore. . . . Then, after breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these fish?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” . . . And Jesus said to him, “Follow Me”** (vv 7, 15, 19).

It's Simon Peter. Again.

His backstory is important.

You probably know it.

Most people do.

He was a Galilean fisherman.

Jesus had said, “Follow Me.”

And Simon Peter had followed. Immediately. Without hesitation.

He dropped his nets.

For three years, he'd followed Jesus into boats and through storms.

Into desolate places and sick rooms.

To synagogue services and mountain tops.

Even to the Garden of Gethsemane

and to the courtyard of the high priest.

On the night when Jesus was betrayed, while eating with Him,

Peter had made this statement:

“Even if I must die with You, I will not deny You!” (Matt 26:35).

And the other disciples all said the same.

So Peter followed Jesus.

Followed Him all the way to the courtyard of the high priest.

And then, suddenly, he stopped following.
 He stopped following because of a servant girl.
 And a simple statement:

“You also were with Jesus the Galilean” (Mt 26:69).

And he denied it. Once. Twice.

The third time with an oath and a curse:

“I don’t know the Man!” (Mt 26:72).

The fisher of men afraid of a servant girl.

What an utter failure.

Not just a partial failure.

The kind of failure where at least you gave it a try.

Put in a little effort. Got it partially right.

Like saying: “I *might* know the man.”

Or “What’s it to you?”

Or even just pretending to be deaf and ignoring the servant girl.

I mean *utter* failure. Complete. Total.

To make matters worse, Jesus had even warned him about this.

Had told him it was coming.

“Before the rooster crows twice,” Jesus had said (Mk 14:30).

So put yourself in Peter’s shoes.

Did the sound of that rooster crowing ever leave his ears?

Did he wake up with a cold sweat as he remembered Jesus looking at him?

Looking at him while being led away to crucifixion.

Did the voice of a servant girl ever make him jump again?

Did the smell of a charcoal fire remind him of that night?

Follow Me.

Peter did, and then he didn’t.

He didn’t follow to the cross.

He didn’t follow to the grave.

Now Jesus is risen!

And what does this mean for Peter?

Will he be allowed to follow Jesus into the resurrection?

Or is that way now closed because of his failure?

Is he barred from the way of Jesus?

Is he cut off from the kingdom of God?

What does Peter do with these questions?
He buries his pain by going fishing.
Went with Thomas and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee,
the two sons of Zebedee, and a couple of others.
Who all have their back stories, too.
Their failures perhaps not as spectacular as Simon Peter's,
but plenty of failure to go around.
We can put St. Paul in that boat, too, as we heard in our first reading.

And to make matters worse,
they were out all night and couldn't catch a single fish.

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Why do we hear about Simon Peter so often?
Because we can relate.
We can relate to his failure.

Because we've also had great intentions to follow Jesus.
To do what is right and lead holy lives.
To hold our tongues.
To keep our promises.
To be bold and courageous in our faith.

But we don't lie awake at night counting our successes.
We all have things we aren't proud of.
Moments we wish we could take back.
Things we would say differently or not say at all.

And we see these failures most in our callings.
The special word for calling is "vocation."
Vocation doesn't just mean your job.
It doesn't just mean church work.
It means all the roles you have.
You have vocations, callings from God at home, in work, and as a neighbor,
as a citizen and part of a community,
and as a member of a church.

You haven't been called to be an apostle, like Simon Peter.

But God has called you.
 He has called you to be a hearer of His word.
 He has called you to be a good citizen and community member.
 He has called you to be a husband, a wife, or single.
 A mother, or a father,
 or one who cares for children in other ways.
 A son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a friend.
 A boss, an employee.

And what have we done with these callings?
 How have we followed Jesus in these vocations?
 Where are the servant girls and the charcoal fires in our lives?
 Have we been splendid successes or utter failures?

I'm no better than Simon Peter.
 There are sounds that remind me of my failures.
 Things that run through my head during sleepless nights.
 People whose names or faces accuse me over and again.
 Smells and tastes of my denials of Jesus.

And what do these have to do with Jesus' resurrection from the dead?
 Has He risen from the dead to remind us of our failures?
 Does He live and reign to point out just how poorly we've followed Him?
 Will He accuse us of loving ourselves
 and neglecting to love others?

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These thoughts and others like them
 may have been running through Simon Peter's head as their nets sat empty.

Then Jesus stood on shore.
 They didn't know it was Him.
"Children," He says, **"do you have any fish?"** (v 5).
 It's not said in mockery.
 It's not to draw attention to their failure.
 It's an invitation for the empty to be filled.
"Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you'll find some" (v 6).
 He directs them. They listen. They follow what He says.
 Before they know it, He fills their nets full to bursting.

It's the Lord!
Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Simon Peter with a mix of emotions inside him can't wait for the boat to get to shore.
He swims. Dives in. Gets to land.
On land, there's a charcoal fire.
A breakfast of fish and bread prepared and served by Jesus.
And there's the Lord.
For the third time revealed to the disciples after He was raised from the dead.
Twice in the upper room. And now by the sea.

Jesus looks at Simon Peter again.
Jesus loves Simon Peter.
He has risen from the dead not to condemn but to forgive.
Not to drain life but to give life.
Not to leave Simon Peter stewing in his failure,
but to restore him and renew him.

Then there's this beautiful, intimate conversation that follows.
A Good Shepherd caring for one of His sheep,
a sheep broken by his sin.
Jesus says to Simon Peter,
"Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?"
"Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."
"Feed My lambs" (v 15).
Once. Twice. Three times.
A triple denial; now a triple restoration.

It wasn't easy to be asked three times if he loved Jesus.
Utter failure that he was, still he did . . . he does love Jesus.
He loved Jesus because Jesus first loved Him.
He loved Jesus because Jesus died for Him—even for his failure.
He loved Jesus because Jesus rose for Him—that he might rise as well.

It's not the end of Simon Peter.
It's a new beginning.
A new beginning as a fisher of men and an under-shepherd of sheep.
The Good Shepherd re-commissions him.
Sends him back to his vocation

to feed and tend the lambs and sheep.
Calls him to be a pastor of Christ's Church.
Despite his failure.
To be pastor through the forgiveness won by Jesus.

And Jesus tells Simon Peter what will happen.
He doesn't mention denials or failures.
This time Simon Peter will follow all the way to death.
**"When you are old, you will stretch out your hands,
and another will dress you and carry you where you don't want to go."**
**This Jesus said to show by what kind of death
Simon Peter was to glorify God.** (vv 18–19)
It's the cross. Peter would glorify God by being crucified upside down.
He would follow Jesus to death.
Then, strengthened by the Lord, he would follow beyond death.
Into life.

For **after saying this**, risen **Jesus said to him, "Follow Me"** (v 19).
Not only to the grave.
But to the resurrection and the life of the world to come.

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"Children, do you have any fish?"
For all your efforts and all your labor, do you have any fish?
No? The fishing's been poor and the failure's been great, you say?
It's not said in mockery.
It's not to draw attention to our failure.
It's an invitation to you, for you who are empty to be filled.

It's the Lord!
Alleluia! Christ is risen!

So Jesus comes for you.
He comes not to the shore of the sea.
But He comes to our little corner of 140, 2, and 2A.

He directs. We listen.
He leads. We follow.
He prepares the meal. We receive.

For the third Sunday celebrating His resurrection.

Today Jesus looks at you.

He loves you.

He sees not your failures.

He sees the blood He shed for you.

And He has risen from the dead not to condemn you but to forgive you.

Not to drain your life but to give you life.

Not to leave you stewing in your failure,

but to restore you and renew you.

To send you back, forgiven.

To be husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter,

friend, boss, worker, citizen, church member through the forgiveness won by Jesus.

To live in your vocations through that forgiveness.

He sends you back into your callings.

It's not the end for you.

It's a new beginning for you.

A new beginning through the forgiveness of sins

and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

So who are the lambs you are called to feed?

Who are the sheep you've been given to tend?

Where will Jesus lead you next?

"Follow Me," He says.

Follow Me even into death,

that you might follow Me into life.

Follow Me not as failures but as those forgiven.

"Follow Me," says risen Jesus,

for you too will rise in the life of the world to come.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ
Jesus.

Phil 4:7
