

John 21:1-19
Easter 3C + May 5, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Ordinary Followers

The Word of the Lord from John 21:19, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow Me." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Peter's life with Jesus really begins in a boat: you can read about it in Luke 5 if you like. Because the crowd is pressing Jesus into the sea, He teaches them from offshore, from Peter's boat. Once He's finished, Jesus tells Peter to let down his nets in the deep, and Peter objects because they've caught nothing all night. Nevertheless, he obeys, and they haul in so many fish that the nets begin to break and the boats begin to sink. It's truly a miracle of God's kindness and provision, for the Lord of land and sea is there with Peter in the boat; but do you remember Peter's reaction? It's not joy or gratitude. It's fear. He says, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk. 5:8). Astonished by the almighty Christ's power and provision, Peter is acutely aware that he is unholy and should be nowhere near holy God; and so he wants to get away.

Now in John 21, three years later, we find Peter in a boat. He's done the most reasonable thing for guys to do while they're waiting by water – he's gone fishing. He and other disciples have spent the night casting nets, and – go figure – they've caught nothing. Now at daybreak, the unrecognized Savior stands onshore and tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. They do so, and the net fills with so many large fish that they cannot haul them in. It's John who says, "It is the Lord!", and this time Peter doesn't cower away from Jesus. Instead, he throws his coat back on, jumps into the water and swims for shore. The Savior of sinners is standing there; and a sinful man like Peter now knows that there is no better place for a sinner to be than with the Lord who has died to take away sins, who makes unholy people into His holy people.

It's worth noting that the risen Jesus meets them with a meal, some charcoal-broiled catch-of-the-day and some bread. Not only that, but John takes a moment to point out that Jesus takes the bread and gives it to them. This has also happened in Emmaus in Luke 24, where the risen Jesus took over the meal, took bread, broke it and gave to two disciples. It's as if the Gospel writers want to make sure that you associate the risen Christ with a meal for you. Hmmm.

Then we arrive at this conversation between Jesus and Peter, where Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love Me?" He asks him three times, slightly differently each time, until Peter is grieved that Jesus keeps asking him. The best guess for the grief is that it brings back bitter memories: Peter denied Jesus three times after Jesus forewarned him, and now Jesus asks him three times if he loves Him. That's probably not a coincidence.

But why does Jesus keep asking the question?

I mean, sinners often remind others of how they've failed in the past, and this is often a passive-aggressive way of saying, "Even though I *said* I forgave you, I actually still hold this against you." But that's not Jesus. He's forgiven Peter: He's spoken that absolution of peace to him. Jesus doesn't harbor grudges: the Lord remembers Peter's sin no more.

So why does Jesus ask the question? Perhaps it's because *Peter* remembers his sin; and as long as those denials trouble him, the devil will use them to make him doubt his love for Jesus, as well as Jesus' love for him. It's one of those funny things about people: impenitent sinners are far faster to

forgive themselves than Jesus is, while penitent sinners are far slower to forgive themselves than Jesus is.

Here then is the Savior, crucified and risen. He's the Lord of heaven and earth, soon to ascend into heaven and sit at the right hand of God, in order to rule over all things. Here He is, taking the time to pull one penitent sinner aside and restore him. He doesn't turn His back, but speaks – repeatedly! Where He speaks, He is at work to save. He asks if Peter loves Him so that Peter can confess out loud that he does. Not only that, but Jesus declares that Peter is His instrument – He tells Peter that he still has a holy calling: "Feed My lambs," "Tend My sheep," "Feed My sheep." Peter is not forsaken nor even demoted: Jesus reinforces that Peter is a forgiven sinner who is called to be His disciple. Peter's life is to glorify God.

So is his death. Jesus goes on, "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." John adds, "This He said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God."

Jesus hints to Peter how Peter will eventually die, but we don't hear how Peter actually dies in Scripture. Tradition tells us that he was crucified, perhaps upside down, and we have no reason to argue; however, tradition is *not* inspired by the Holy Spirit. Within Scripture, I do find the last story of Peter in Acts to be fascinating and on point: see if you can spot any parallels between this account and Holy Week. Peter is arrested by Herod during the Passover, and it's Herod's intent to kill him. Imprisoned, he's considered as good as dead. When Peter sleeps in a heavily-guarded prison, an angel wakes him by striking him in the side and saying, "Follow me." The angel leads him past the guards and out the gate. Peter then makes his way to where believers have gathered to pray; and when a servant girl tells them that Peter is alive, freed and outside, they believe she is mad. When the door is opened and they see him, they are amazed; then he speaks to them and goes elsewhere. The account ends with the news that "when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter" (Acts 12:18). But where the soldiers who guarded Jesus' tomb are bribed to spread lies, Herod orders that these guards be put to death.

After that, Peter almost completely disappears from Acts as the story of Paul takes over. He speaks once in Acts 15, but his rescue in Acts 12 is really his swansong: he endures this arrest and escape that can't help but remind him of Jesus' arrest, death and resurrection; and then he goes on his way as one whom Jesus has forgiven and called. He'll write two epistles that are included in the New Testament. We don't know for sure when or where or how he dies; but we know that as his life is lived to God's glory, his death is died to God's glory, too.

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It is entirely possible, probable even, that your life with Jesus began at a font; and where Jesus spoke words to draw fish out of water for Peter, Jesus spoke words to wash sin off of you.

Do not dismiss this wonder, but marvel: it is an astonishing act of love that the Lord of heaven and earth became flesh to die for the sins of the world, but the Lord is not content to be so general. Thus, as He took time especially to restore Peter personally, so He has focused His attention specifically upon you. He wrote your name in the Book of Life. He engraved it on the palms of His hands. This is reflected in the usual practice of baptism: we don't say, "I baptize you, generic person among the billions." We use names, because the Lord knows you by name.

And as the Lord repeatedly restored Peter in our text, the Lord continues to restore you, to forgive your sins and strengthen your faith by His holy Word. You might be tempted to equate a worship service to a lecture, where you sit in a crowd while a speaker drones on who doesn't know your name

(and doesn't care to); but that is hardly the case. The Lord knows His people by name, and He knows that you are here. He sends forth His Holy Spirit by His Word into your ears. He says, "I've died for you, and I am risen again. I am your strength against temptation; and where you have trouble forgiving yourself, I have forgiven all of your sins and hold none of them against you."

If the Lord forgives you, then you are His holy child; and if you are His holy child, then He has given you holy stuff to do. As you await Christ's return in glory, you are not merely in a holding pattern, but the Lord has given you purpose. He has appointed you to be His servant by the various callings He's given. Those daily tasks and vocations, like life in the household or a pesky day job, are not how you pass the time *until* the Lord decides to make use of you – they are how the Lord *is* using you as His instrument even now. You need not be an apostle to do holy work. What makes your work holy is that you are made holy by the blood of Christ. Your tasks may seem frightfully ordinary for this to be true, but that is because God is a God of order who usually works through ordinary means, ordinary people and ordinary callings. As one who is forgiven and cleansed, repentant and believing, your entire life is thus glorifying to God.

Likewise, your death is glorifying to God. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints," says Psalm 116:15, and it is perhaps here where it is more difficult to believe without seeing than anywhere else. But the one who dies in the faith is not dead. The death of the Christian's body is the planting of a seed so that it can be raised up again, far greater than it ever was in this world. And when a believer dies, Christians gather not only to mourn or recall the past, but to confess with confidence that those who die in Christ live even now, and will be raised up body-and-all on the Last Day. However Peter died, his death glorified God because he was following Jesus. However it is given you to die, your death as a Christian will do the same because Jesus has made you His follower: even if that glory goes unnoticed in this world, just wait until heaven exults when the Lord calls you out of your grave! All this is why St. Paul could write, "For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (Rom. 14:8-9).

Christ has died and Christ lives again to be your Lord both now and forevermore. By His Word, He bids you, "Follow Me," and within that call is an everyday, ongoing blessed promise. The Lord knows you by name. He has redeemed you by His blood. He continues to forgive and sanctify you by His Word and His Supper; and because He sanctifies you, He rejoices in your works. As I've said before, your daily works are like a kid's drawings that parents value so highly that they place it on the refrigerator for all to see; and likewise, your life is full of refrigerator art to God – no matter how ordinary it may seem to you – because He has made you His holy child at the cost of His only-begotten Son.

"Follow Me," says Jesus. He said it to Peter; and as one of the apostles, Peter had an extraordinary life. Still, he had the same sins you do, and the same Savior. So Jesus says to you, "Follow Me." He says that to you because He's called you to be His. By His Word and work, He enlivens you to follow Him in life, in death, in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen