



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Breakfast on the Beach”

On This Rock a Lenten Sermon Series Part VIII

John 21:1-17

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Introduction:

Our scripture reading comes from the Gospel of John. It is generally agreed that this particular chapter, chapter 21, serves as a sort of “epilogue.” It is one last, but very important, story of Jesus that simply had to be told. The chapter just before, chapter 20, is a busy one, in which Jesus’ resurrection is told, and Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and at last to Thomas. If the Gospel ended with chapter 20, we’d think it a fine conclusion. And yet, it is not the end. Because there is still Peter.

All season long, we have followed Peter, the disciple Jesus nicknamed “the rock.” We’ve heard how he left his nets and followed. We’ve seen his bold faith, the first to confess Jesus as the Messiah. We’ve watched him step out of the boat and walk on water, if only for a moment. We’ve seen his misunderstandings, his overconfidence, his fear. We’ve heard his bold promises, and we’ve stood in the shadows of that courtyard as they fell apart.

Peter’s story, in so many ways, is our story. He’s a mixture of courage and fear, faith and doubt, devotion and failure.

Thank goodness John’s Gospel didn’t end at chapter 20, with the resurrection appearances and the belief, because we might have otherwise been left wondering, “What happens to Peter? Is



there still a place for him? Is there a future after that kind of failure?” Thank goodness for John 21 because those questions matter, and the Gospel is not complete until we know what grace does with our failure.

So, we are given this final scene, back where it all began, on the beach on an ordinary morning with tired fishermen and empty nets.

John 21:1-17. ¹After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, ‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ ⁶He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’ ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ ¹⁶A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ ¹⁷He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep..’

There is something comforting about muscle memory. That call and response we say week after week, “The Word of the Lord/Thanks be to God,” comes so naturally to many of us. There are things our bodies just know how to do. Things we can do without thinking.



My mom told me that when my grandmother was dying, she would lie in her hospital bed and pick at threads and sewing pins that weren't there. She had sewn her whole life, and in her foggy mental state, her hands still believed there was work to be done.

Years ago, when my grandfather was in the hospital after a surgery, my dad remembers him holding an invisible cigarette, flicking ashes that didn't exist.

There are some rhythms that get into our bones. Sometimes, when the mind is overwhelmed, the body takes over.

That must have been why the disciples went fishing. It is only days after the resurrection. Their world has been turned upside down. Fear, grief, amazement, hope, and confusion, all tangled together. And what does Peter say? "I'm going fishing." Not because it makes sense, but because it's familiar. Because when everything else falls apart, we reach for what we know.

Debie Thomas puts it this way in her commentary on John, when we are ashamed, when we are wounded, we "retreat to whatever is safe, comfortable, and familiar... [we] run headlong towards anything that will help us feel competent and worthy."¹

Peter goes back to his boat. Back to his nets. Back to the life he knew before Jesus.

But here's the thing, once you've encountered Jesus, while you can go back to what's familiar, you can't go back to who you were.

So, they fish all night. They catch nothing. Of course they don't, because life without resurrection, life without grace, is always, ultimately, empty. And then it's daybreak, they're exhausted, they're grieving, they're going through the motions, and Jesus shows up.

The disciples don't recognize him at first (resurrection rarely looks how we expect it to). He calls to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat." And suddenly, abundance! They can't haul the sheer number of fish in, it's that heavy. Maybe it reminds them of another time they went fishing with Jesus (Luke 5). Something clicks and they realize, "It is the Lord."

Peter, impulsive, passionate Peter, throws on his clothes and dives into the water. He doesn't wait for the boat or his friends. He just jumps in, like he always does – act first, think later.

Peter must have felt the strangest mix of emotion. One of the last times he saw Jesus, he stood near a charcoal fire in a courtyard and denied him ... three times. "I don't know the man," he said. It's a shame so palpable it makes me cringe. I wonder if Peter expected to spend the rest of his life fleeing that memory. Yet here he is. Running toward Jesus, not away.

When the disciples reach the shore, what do they find? Not anger or disappointment, but breakfast: a charcoal fire, bread, fish. Jesus has already prepared the meal. This is important... Jesus does not begin with confrontation; he begins with nourishment. He feeds their tired bodies before he addresses their souls.



This is how grace works. Grace meets us in our hunger before it deals with our failure.

Only after breakfast does Jesus turn to Peter. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Three times he asks, this call and response. And I imagine it hurts. It hurts because it echoes Peter’s three denials. It must bring Peter back to the very place we can imagine he wants to forget. And this is where the story becomes almost unbearable in its tenderness. Jesus doesn’t avoid Peter’s shame. He returns him to it, not to punish him, but to heal him. “Jesus saves Peter by returning him to the source of his shame... not to condemn, accuse or retaliate... but for healing, restoration, and commissioning.”ⁱⁱ

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

Again.

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Tend my sheep.”

Again.

“Do you love me?”

“Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

Three denials, three restorations—not erased, but redeemed. Jesus doesn’t pretend the failure didn’t happen, but he refuses to let it be the final word. Instead, he gives Peter two gifts we all desperately need: belonging and purpose. Peter is not cast out, he is drawn in. He is not disqualified, he is commissioned.

“Feed my sheep.” In other words, *stay, lead, love, serve*. One’s failure is not the end of the one’s story. It’s the place where grace begins.

Maybe this is the heart of the story for disciples like you and me. Because we know what it is to fail. We know what it is to say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, remain silent when we know we should have spoken up, speak when we know we should have kept quiet. We know what it is to carry shame. We know what it feels like to replay the moments we wish we could undo.

But how fortunate are we that we are not defined by the worst things we have done. Jesus is not waiting on the shore to shame you. Our Lord is waiting to feed you.

“Do you love me?” Friends, that’s the only question that matters in the end.ⁱⁱⁱ Not “did you fail?” Not “did you get everything right?” Just, simply, “Do you love me?”



Love is what makes restoration possible. Love is what transforms shame. Love is what sends us back into the world with purpose. Debie Thomas writes, “Peter’s shame meets Jesus’ grace, and Jesus’ grace wins.”^{iv} Thanks be to God, that is the Good News of the Gospel. Grace wins. Not because we deserve it, but because that’s who Jesus is.

So what would it look like for us to live like that? What would it look like to be people who don’t weaponize shame, but offer restoration? What would it look like if Christians, if the church, were known as the kind of people you could run to in times of pain, humiliation, and grief?

That’s our invitation into this story, Second Presbyterian Church, to be the kind of community shaped by this breakfast on the beach. That’s our invitation to be the kind of a community where people are fed, where failure is not the end, where love speaks louder than shame, where people hear again and again, “You belong. You are loved. You have a purpose.”

In Acts, it is Peter who is the rock. This frightened and fearful disciple is the one who founds churches, welcomes the Gentiles, and grafts us into Christ’s church. Tradition tells us that though Peter was too afraid to follow Jesus to the cross in Jerusalem, he did follow him all the way to his own cross in Rome. Flawed and imperfect, Jesus saw something more in Peter than he could have ever seen in himself. Peter had to learn to be brave enough to follow.

Brothers and sisters, the same grace that restores us is the grace we are called to extend. The same love that feeds us is the love we are called to share. The risen Christ is still standing on the shore, still calling out to weary, empty-handed people, still preparing a meal, still asking the only question that matters. “Do you love me?”

And still saying in response, “Then feed my sheep.”

ⁱ Debie Thomas, *Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ*, (Cascade Books), 2022, “You Know Everything.”

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Jenny McDevitt, “John 21:1-19, Easter 3C” for By the Vine Preaching Group, 2018.

^{iv} Thomas.

