

Sunday May 4th, 2025

Easter III

John 21:1-19

“Feeding Sheep”

I don't know about you, but I think life has all these big challenges that we must face. The issue is not *will* you have challenges in life; the issue is *how you will deal* with the challenges that ultimately come. I heard someone who said, "The trouble with life is that it's so daily." One of the hardest things about life is the discouragement that comes at the hands of people. I've always thought that ministry would be a cakewalk if it weren't for people.

How many of you have ever said, down deep inside, "I just didn't think it would turn out like this"? It isn't long before the waves of discouragement and disappointment begin to bury your heart and your spirit. You work hard to keep going, but something's dying deep inside. If the discouragements don't get you, then failure will begin to haunt your spirit. You'll think, *I'm not worthy. I'm such a failure. I'm such a loser.*

If those kinds of things don't get you, then the distractions of cash and comfort and all the wonderful lures that are trolled by your heart, mind, and life in this world will totally distract you from the things that really count. If you can identify with what I'm saying, please know that you're not alone. Some of God's best people struggled so deeply with these types of things that they began to go "off mission" or "off calling."

One of those people is one of our favorite guys in the New Testament—Peter. We meet him in a desperate moment in John 21, and I think it's important for us to ask ourselves what's going on in this text. I'd heard a lot of sermons on this text—and had preached a few myself—before I finally landed on what I think is really being said here. It's all in the words that Jesus says to Peter: Do you *agape* me?

You've probably been hanging around the church world long enough to know that *agape* love is the highest form of love. It's not an emotional response; it is volitional. *Agape* love is a commitment to loving regardless of what comes. It is a choice that I make to care for you and your needs. It is the word most often used of God's love to us. Jesus says: Peter, do you *agape* me?

Peter replies: Yes, Lord, you know that I (what does he say?) *phileo* you. Did you catch the difference? In English we have one word for love but in Greek there are several. *Phileo* is the word for brotherly love. I've heard it said that in this story, Jesus is trying to ratchet up Peter's level of commitment. That theory falls apart with the third question that Jesus asks. Jesus now says: Peter, do you *phileo* me?

It is just like Jesus to lower the bar of commitment, right? Wrong! I've never known Jesus to lower the bar of commitment. Interestingly, *phileo* and *agape* are sometimes used interchangeably. To be fair to Peter, he may be saying: It is not just the volitional commitment of my heart, Lord. We've been together for three years. You are like a brother to me. This goes deep with me, Lord.

Sunday May 4th, 2025

Easter III

Three different times, so we don't miss the point, Jesus says: If you love me, you will care about what I care about. That's how I'll know that you love me. Feed my lambs. Jesus is talking about people and their need to be fed. He's talking about giving yourself to the needs and nourishment of people. You and I need to remember that when Christ came here, he was passionately addicted to one commodity on this planet: people.

I never hear him saying to Judas: Look at that nice hill over there. How much money do we have in the treasury? Let's buy it and we can build a messianic library there, so that after I'm gone people will remember who I am. Jesus was always into people, so he says to Peter: I will know that you love me when you care about people. When you care about what I care about, then I will know.

When Christ came, he didn't spend most of his time with religious folks. In fact, he had strong words about their hypocrisy, how their structures and rules oppressed people, and how they totally missed the point of caring for people. Instead, Jesus spent most of his time with the marginalized, the poor, the oppressed, and the disadvantaged. If we're going to care about people, we might want to think about the horrible AIDS crisis in Africa.

We might want to think of Ukraine. We might want to think of people whose needs are great, whose lives are marginalized, who live without hope, helpless in the face of the phenomenal odds of life against them.

When I think about this triple interrogation, I think about how traumatic it would be for Jesus to go after me three times over the same point. Why, is Jesus, hounding Peter like this? The answer to that question is not found in the immediate context, so we must go to the broader context. As I went back to verse 1 of chapter 21, it suddenly became very apparent to me. Simon Peter says to most of the disciples: Let's go back to what we know how to do. Let's get life back under control. Let's open a new fishing business.

For them to do what Peter is suggesting, they would have to go off mission or off calling, threatening the very purpose of the ongoing work of God in their lives. Had they chosen to live the life of fishermen, you and I may not be sitting here tonight, redeemed. This is a very serious moment. They're being tempted to go off mission and off calling. I'm not sure I blame them, because I'd be discouraged, too.

I think I would be saying, "I don't think this is turning out the way I thought it would." For three years, they walked with the headliner. They were in the spotlight. Their expectation was not that Jesus would go to the cross to bring in a spiritual kingdom, but that he was going to overthrow the Roman Empire and bring in a social, political, economic kingdom—to restore Israel to its former glory and sit on the throne of David.

Guess who they thought would be in the King's cabinet. But Jesus makes this announcement: That sort of thinking is wrong. The kingdom will come someday, but I am going to the cross, and you are going to suffer. Jesus goes to the cross, and they shudder behind locked doors for fear that they, too, will be killed by the Roman government.

Sunday May 4th, 2025

Easter III

Then they hear the word: "He's risen!" Can you imagine how their hearts leapt within them? *He's alive! He's coming back! Here we go again!* But Jesus never shows up. When he finally does, he shows up in weird ways. They're in a room, and there he is. He materializes, shows them the wounds, eats with them, and then he's gone again.

Do you think you'd be a little discouraged at this point? Might your heart be saying: *I didn't think it was going to turn out like this. How about if we go back to life as it used to be, something we know about, something we can control?* No wonder they're distracted by earth-side stuff, saying: Let's open our fishing business and maybe we'll have enough money to buy food and robes and sandals.

When Peter brought up the idea of returning to their nets, the rest of the disciples said, "We'll go with you." So, they went out and got into the boat. They fished all night, and they didn't catch a thing.

Now, if you've taken a day off to go fishing, getting skunked is no big deal. If it's the first day of your new business, it's huge. Can you picture them working hard, fishing all night? This was hard work; it was not like fly-fishing with flies that you made in your basement. It was hauling in heavy, water-soaked nets. Each time they drew in the net, it was empty. Think of the discouragement compounded over and over and over.

If you bail on Jesus—going off mission because you think there is something better out there—you'll fish all night, and in the end, you will have caught nothing. Remember that. When you walk through the gates, you'll know that you have spent your life catching nothing. The text says the day breaks, and a man appears on the beach. They don't know it is Jesus. The guy on the shore calls out: Hey! How's fishin'?

They reply: It stinks! We fished all night and caught nothin'. Now put yourself in the disciples' place. The guy on the beach tells them to try something new—to throw their net on the other side! They were probably thinking, *where did that bozo come from?* But you know what happened. When they pull the nets back in, they're full of fish. John tells us that Peter puts his robe on, climbs overboard (again), and sashes through the shallows to meet Christ while the others row the boat in.

Why would Peter jump off the side of the boat and run to meet Christ? This is not the first time this miracle has happened. In Luke 5 Jesus is ministering to the crowds with his back to the sea. The crowds are pressing in him. Standing in the shallows of the water, he sees fishermen mending their nets. He says: Would you put me in your boat and row me out a little bit so I can finish teaching?

They agreed, rowed Jesus out a little bit, he finished his teaching, and the crowd dispersed. He then turned to the fishermen, and he said: How's fishin'? They replied: It stinks! We fished all night and caught nothin'. He said: Let's ride out just a little way farther and cast your nets on the other side of the boat.

When they did, the net was so full of fish that it began to break with the weight of them.

Sunday May 4th, 2025

Easter III

At that moment, Peter falls on his face before Christ and shouts, "Depart from me! Woe is me! I am a sinner!" Peter is so struck by Jesus' authoritative teaching—and by the Person whom the fish obey—that he cries out as a repentant sinner. As Jesus always does to the repentant sinner's cry, he gives not a word of judgment, but the motion of mercy. He says: Peter, get up. Follow me. From now on you will no longer be a fisher of fish, but you will become a fisher of people. *People*.

Luke says that immediately the fishermen left their nets and followed Jesus. They immediately got into the people business. I'll tell you why Peter now jumps out of the boat and runs to Christ: Jesus planned the second miracle to take Peter back to the moment of his calling—so he would remember that moment when Christ was so compellingly real, so totally worthy of everything in his life, that he'd give up his business for Christ.

Maybe this is a good thing for those of us who are a little discouraged that life is not turning out the way we thought it would. If you're walking with Christ, go back to the moment of your calling. Remediate your heart by remembering that day. Remember when Christ was so compelling, so worthy. Remember when you came to the cross, and he bathed you in his precious blood and set you free.

Remember when he canceled hell and guaranteed heaven. Remember when you said, "I'll give it all for you." Tell me: What has changed? Has Jesus changed? Have the needs of people changed? Or have you changed? Go back. Remember that day. This was a very intentional miracle on Christ's part. The miracle was not only to put the fish into the net, but also to keep the fish out of the net all night so Jesus could remind Peter of his calling.

As Peter ran to the shore and the other disciples joined him, the text says, "They found there a charcoal fire." John only has so many words to tell this story, so every word and detail is going to be pivotal. Why does he say they found a *charcoal* fire that Christ has lit? The word "charcoal" is only used twice in the New Testament—in this text and in the story where Peter warmed himself in the courts and denied the Lord.

You know how aromas bring back memories? I can't help but wonder if, as Peter ran to the shore, the pungent aroma of this charcoal didn't immediately remind him of the pungent aroma of the charcoal fire where he had betrayed the Lord. Jesus addresses his failure around that fire, saying: I know that you failed, but Peter, I desperately want to use you.

Isn't it nice that Jesus can use failures? If he waited for only perfect people to get involved, he'd still be doing it all himself. At this charcoal fire he calls Peter back. He says: Peter, I just need to know if you love me or not. That's what I need to know.

The other thing that strikes me about this story is that you know fishermen wrote it, because they counted the fish! There were 153 in total. Not only that, but the text also says all 153 were *large* fish. But when the disciples come to the shore, Jesus is already cooking fillets of fish. Where did those fillets come from?

Sunday May 4th, 2025

Easter III

You've heard about the Last Supper; this is the last breakfast, and it's almost as important. I think Jesus is making this point: You thought you had to go off mission to care for your needs. You thought you had to go off mission to get a little more cash. But I carry the prerogative of your provision.

What a dramatic example of how Jesus will provide for us when we stay on mission. He will not only provide for us but will provide generously and abundantly—153 *large* fish, plus the ones frying on the fire.

The next time you think about going off mission, the next time you think about compromising your integrity, the next time you think about cheating the kingdom for a little extra cash, please remember that you'll always end up with an empty net. Jesus will provide for you. That's the point he is making.

But what I'm struck by finally is that the first question is not like the second and the third, because Jesus says, "Peter, do you love me more than these?" What does that mean? My first thought is that Jesus is talking about the other disciples. But is Jesus really going to launch a love-off contest here? I don't think so. He's had it up to here with their competitive spirits about who will be the "greatest in the kingdom."

There's only one thing left in the story: that pile of 153 slimy, scaly fish. Jesus is saying: Peter, do you love me more than fish? I think Jesus would ask the same question of us. I don't know what it is that tempts you off mission or off calling. I don't know what it is that tempts you not to get on mission and on calling. I just know that sometimes we get caught up in ourselves, and the needs of the losers and marginalized and oppressed and hopeless don't even cross our minds. All I know is, the problem is the fish. It's the fish that keep us off mission.

What are the fish in your life? Are they your own dreams, your desire for comfort, or some sin that you've chosen over the fullness of Jesus? I want you to hear Jesus say: Do you love me more than those fish?

I'd like to believe that God would walk into our hearts like he always does, push all that stuff aside, and go right for our heart. I wonder if he sees a wide-open door to a heart that beats with his passion. Or I wonder if there's a little sign swinging on the door of your heart that says, "Gone Fishin'."