



GONE FISHING: EASTER POSTLUDE

John 21

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Easter is finished, but Jesus is still risen. He is just as risen today as He was last Sunday, and He is risen forever. We've all gone back to our jobs and our daily routines. We might be wondering, "How do we really live in light of His resurrection?"—especially if we've really blown it this week. Maybe some of us have and we're feeling the sting of our failure. We're wondering, "Is He through with me? Can I be of any use to Jesus after how I've failed Him so?"

Think of those first disciples. It must have been a mixture of emotions as they saw the risen Jesus. Oh, yes, there was exuberant joy. But we know there were also doubts, and we can imagine there was also a measure of shame and regret, as they all had forsaken Him and fled at His hour of greatest need. Peter especially denied Him.

So the words we read in this "Easter Postlude", John 21, are especially precious for those of us who are feeling our weakness and failures.

Prone to wander, Lord I do feel it. Though my love is oft' so cold, as we sing in "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." You might not be feeling the sting of failure today, but you will someday. There will be days when you wonder, "Is Jesus through with me?"

The good news of this passage in John 21 is that Jesus the risen Christ wants us to know He's not done with us. No matter how badly we've failed Him, there is a way back. You can be a fruitful, authentic, vibrant follower of Jesus, even if you've never been so far—even if you've really blown it this week. John 21 tells us how. Let's begin reading at verse one. *"After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way..."*

Just pause there for a minute. The risen Jesus keeps revealing Himself. It's not just a rare thing that happens once in a great while. The only way we can continue following Jesus is if we continue seeing and savoring Him, if we continue experiencing the revelation of Jesus. The Apostle Paul tells us this happens through the Word of God. *"For God, who said, 'Let light shine*

out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

He's still revealing Himself to believers who come to Him in His Word. He's revealing Himself by His Spirit, and there is more for us in Jesus than we have yet to lay hold of; there's more to see of Jesus. Praise Him that He hasn't stopped revealing Himself to us. He wants us to see Him, so that we will savor Him, so that we can share Him with a world that needs Him.

Now let's look at John 21:2-3: "*Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.'*" They're going back to what was familiar—a very human thing to do. They'd seen the risen Christ, but they're not sure yet what that really means for their lives. What should change now?

We really ought not to be too hard on them for taking this little fishing trip. G.R. Beasley-Murray of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary says, "Never has a fishing trip been so severely judged as this trip." We can be so hard on these disciples: "They should have been more spiritual than that. How could they go back to fishing after they'd seen the risen Jesus?"

Have you ever gone home from a great day at church and just sat in front of the TV and vegetated for a while? Are you so spiritual that after every encounter you have with God, you just never want to do anything ordinary, never want to do anything human again? Have you reached some higher plane of spirituality? I mean, the disciples are worn out. They've gone through a lot. They're not sure what to do next. So they go fishing—but they experience a night of futile toil. Look at the end of verse three. "*They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*"

I wonder if they were thinking of another night of futile toil a few years earlier, the night when they met Jesus for the first time. They caught nothing until He gave the command, and then the boat was so full it was about to sink. Jesus is letting His disciples experience another night like this, because if we always are utterly successful in everything we do for Jesus, we'd start to pat ourselves on the back and think, "We did that." Jesus wants us to know that apart from Him we can do nothing.

Look at verse four: "*Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.*" Jesus is standing on the shoreline. He doesn't stay in Jerusalem waiting for His disciples to come to Him. He goes to Galilee, where He knows they'll be. He finds them where they are. He doesn't say, "You know, you guys have really blown it. You failed Me when I was dying for you. You know where to find Me. If you want Me, you come find Me."

He goes and waits for them on the seashore. Jesus today is still going to where failed disciples are, finding us in our futility, ready to meet us fresh. He knows all about our failures. He knows what might be stinging our consciences today. He knows we've denied Him and disappointed Him. There's not a single part of our lives that Jesus doesn't know. There's not a single place we go where Jesus won't go with us, where He won't find us. He's standing on the shore.

I love the account in verses five through eight: *"Jesus said to them, 'Children, do you have any fish?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.'" Who says things like that? Only He Who rules the wind and the waves and knows all the fishes of the sea, because He put them there. "So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish."* And now they remember, "Whoa. This has happened before.

"That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea." Peter couldn't wait to get to Jesus. Those other poor disciples *"came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish."* Peter's not helping them. *"For they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off."*

What's Jesus doing on the shore as all His disciples come to Him? I mean, there are a lot of things Jesus could have done right then. He could have started with a lecture: "You guys, I need to really set you straight. Do you realize all the ways you failed Me these last couple weeks? Do you realize how you've blown it now? I'm going to ask you to work a lot harder; to try harder to be better disciples." He could have really gotten hold of them and shaken them up a little bit.

But that's not what Jesus is doing. Verse nine, *"When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread."* Jesus knows they're tired, they're hungry, they're weary—and He's cooking them breakfast. There are two places in John's Gospel where we read of a charcoal fire. When Peter saw that charcoal fire, he would have remembered the other place. Look at John 21:10-14:

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have 5-breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Let's pause here for a minute. What a kind, compassionate, sensitive, servant-hearted Savior you have, when you trust in Jesus. He doesn't just take care of your big needs. He takes

care of your little ones. He makes breakfast. He ministers to you at the most basic level. When someone really wounds you, grieves you, disappoints you, betrays you, denies you—how eager are you to get up early in the morning and cook them a special breakfast? How eager are you to go find them so you can clear away the rubble of all that’s gone wrong and establish a close relationship again? What a kind Savior you have. What a gentle Shepherd. What a loving Friend you have in Jesus. He knows your needs.

It’s not by accident that John tells us about this charcoal fire. The one other place Peter had seen a charcoal fire is recorded in John 18:18. Let read it, starting with verse 15:

Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in. The servant girl at the door said to Peter, “You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

I think there are places in our lives where—when we go there—we remember something very painful. Hearing a certain song brings up a whole lot of emotions. Maybe even a certain smell reminds you of something shameful. We probably all have memories like that. I wonder what it was like for Peter to see his Lord beside this charcoal fire, remembering how just a couple weeks earlier he has stood warming himself with the enemies of Jesus. He didn’t have the courage to say, as did the other disciple, that he belonged to Jesus.

What was Jesus doing when Peter was warming himself by that fire? Jesus was being subjected to the cruel torment of His enemies. He was being tried and sentenced to crucifixion...for Peter’s sins. Now beside this charcoal fire, Jesus had a captive audience. This was the perfect time to let Peter have it. I can think of lots of things we might have said if we had met Peter at that charcoal fire again.

I mean, what do you say when someone hurts you deeply? How do you respond? Do you say, “I’m going to make sure he really knows how wrong he was; I’m really going to make sure he’s sorry; I’m really going to make sure he never does that again”? Or maybe you have an unspoken, zero-tolerance policy for relational pain. Yeah, you’ll act civil—but there’s no way you’re ever getting close again. No way you’re going to trust that person again. Anyone who hurts you—you’re done with them.

Ask yourself, “Where would I be today if Jesus treated me the way I treat those who offend me?” Jesus asked Peter a question three times. It’s not a question designed to put Peter

in his place He elicits a response three times from Peter, because Peter denied Him three times. And it's not, "How dare you?" It's not, "Are you really sorry?" . It's a question designed to draw Peter close to His heart, designed to melt the ice and bridge the gap—to make them one again.

Let's read verses 15-17:

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." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved 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 it is! The question that draws out the poison and heals the infection: "Do you love Me?" You might think Jesus wants you to work hard for Him, or perform successfully for Him, or maybe win the world for Him. Jesus says, "No. What I want to know is: do you love Me? I want your heart. That's what I want. Do you love Me?" Because what is discipleship without love for Jesus? You can have lots of knowledge, but little love. You can be very busy doing things for Jesus, but not really loving Him. You can profess a lot and talk a lot and work a lot and dream a lot and give a lot and preach a lot—yet love only a little.

If you love Jesus, it will be the fragrance that fills everything about you. If you love Him, it will be like light—it will be seen. It will be like sound—it will be heard. It will be like heat—it will be felt. Love for Jesus can't be hidden. "Do you love Me today," your Savior asks you. Clear away all that clutter you came here with today. Clear away all the incessant conversations going on in your mind and all the things you want to put right in your life and all the things you're upset about and all the things you're worried about and all the things you're busy with. Clear all that away for a minute and just let Jesus ask you this question, because it matters to Him. He wants to know, "Do you love Me? Do you?"

This is how He restores us after we've failed. It starts and it ends with love. That's what Jesus cares about. We see three ways that Jesus is restoring Peter, and these are the ways Jesus restores us when we fail Him.

1. Jesus makes us face our sin.

In the first question in verse 15 Jesus is making Peter face his sin; He doesn't sweep it under the rug. "Do you love me more than these?" Some people think maybe He's talking about the fish, but I think it's much more likely that He's talking about His other disciples. "Peter, do

you love Me more than these other disciples?” The reason Jesus is asking Peter that question is because before his denial, Peter was very boastful about how much he loved Jesus more than these other schmucks. (That wasn’t in my notes. That just came out!)

Peter said, “Even if everyone else falls away, I’m not going to fall away. I’m going to be true to You, Jesus. I’m not like them. I love You more than they do.” Beware of thinking you love Jesus more than other Christians love Him. Beware of thinking you’re more spiritual—or are on a higher plane. Do you know why? You do not know how much other Christians love Jesus. You also don’t know how fickle your own heart might be or how weak your own love might be. If you’re too confident and cocky about your love for Jesus compared to other people’s, the Lord has lots of ways of snuffing out that conceit.

What was Peter’s denial at the core? It was a denial of love. At the very moment his Savior was giving His life for him, Peter couldn’t even acknowledge to a girl that he belonged to Jesus. It was all about himself, protecting his reputation, protecting his life. So when Peter hears this question, “*Do you love me more than these?*” he’s been chastened. He’s seen his sin. And he doesn’t say, “Yes, Lord, I love you more than Thomas or John or Andrew.” He just says, “*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*” There’s a humbling that needs to take place here.

2. Jesus makes us declare our love.

Three times Peter denied. Three times he was forced to state: “I love You, Lord. I love You. I love You.” From the same mouth that the denials came, Jesus wanted to hear love. Now, it grieved Peter deeply that the Lord kept asking him this, but Peter needs to have this emblazoned on his heart. He needs to hear himself stating again and again what should have been true all along:

My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign.
My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

(My Jesus, I Love Thee by William R. Featherston, 1864)

Jesus is drawing this out of Peter because He wants to erase from Peter’s consciousness the bitterness and shame of his sin. Jesus doesn’t want Peter saying for the rest of his life, “I had failed so miserably that Jesus is never going to use me again.” Jesus is saying to Peter, “You know what, Peter? I do know what’s in your heart. I do know you love Me and I want you to know it too. I want you to say it.”

Only love for Jesus will sustain you in service. The only way you’re going to keep on feeding Jesus’ sheep—taking care of His flock—is if you love Jesus. “So, Peter, say it.” I wonder,

do you tell Jesus that you love Him? Do you articulate that personally to your Lord? He wants to hear it from you. Jesus makes us face our sin. He makes us declare our love.

It's relatively easy to say, "I love you." Millions of times throughout the world today, people are going to be saying, "I love you." Sometimes it will be sincere and thoughtful; other times it will be flippant and casual. Sometimes people will mean it; other times they won't. Carl Laferton says searchingly, "Some people, when they say 'I love you,' really mean, 'I love me.' Or, 'I love you for now.' Or, 'I love you as long as you do this for me.'" But listen:

To truly love someone is to put your heart in their hands and to allow them to break it if they choose. It is to invest your future in theirs, so that your happiness is staked on what they do. It is to commit to putting them first, even when that's hard. It's to take a huge risk.

As I was reading those words, Kate was in the room with me. She didn't know what I was reading. I just looked at her and it really hit me. This is what she's done for me. Kate has put her heart in my hands and said, "He can break it if he chooses." Kate has invested her future in mine, so that her happiness is staked on what I do. Kate has committed to putting me first, even when that's hard. She's taken a huge risk. I thought about that as I looked at her, and then I thought, "Does Jesus know that about me? Does He know I love Him like that?"

3. Jesus makes us demonstrate our love.

It's easy to say, "I love you," but Jesus wants us to do love for Him. He wants us to demonstrate it. But we struggle, don't we? Here's what we really feel like sometimes: We feel like adulterers, coming home from the scene of our sin into a beautifully decorated house, finding a wonderful feast on the table, prepared in love by our spouse who loves us even though we've treated him or her so shamefully. That's how we feel with Jesus.

What was Jesus doing when Peter was denying Him? Jesus was being "*despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief*" (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus was going to be crushed for Peter's transgressions, bruised for his iniquities, punished to bring him peace, struck on His back with lashes so that by His wounds Peter could be healed. Jesus was being led away like a Lamb to the slaughter so that His sheep—Peter, who was wandering away like a lost sheep—could be restored into the fold. In the face of Calvary love, it can feel so cheap and tawdry to just say, "I love You, Lord." It must be demonstrated that we love Jesus.

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

(When I Survey the Wondrous Cross by Isaac Watts, 1707_

What does demonstrating love look like? We see in this passage that love endures. Love perseveres. Jesus asked Peter three times to remind him, “You know, Peter, love isn’t a part-time thing. It’s going to demand all of you. It’s not on-again, off-again. Love never fails.” Love is for a lifetime. If you love Jesus today, you will love Him tomorrow. If you love Jesus today, you will love Him 40 years from now. Love endures.

Love adores. Peter knows Who Jesus is. He calls Him, “Lord.” He gets out of the boat and runs through the water to find Him. He sincerely worships Him. And if you love Jesus, you will adore Him for Who He says He is. You can’t say, “Jesus, I love You, but I don’t really believe You are God. I don’t really believe You are King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And I’m not really going to let You rule my life.” If you love Jesus, you will adore Him, and you will fall worshipfully at His feet, submitting your life to Him.

Love endures, love adores and love cares. “If you love Me, Peter, feed My sheep. Tend My lambs. Take care of My precious flock, because they are dear to Me.” Jesus never calls His sheep stupid. They are precious in His sight. “Peter, if you love Me, feed them. Nourish them. Give them My Word. Teach them My ways. Massage the gospel into them. Build them up with the Word of My grace, so that they become strong in their assurance of Who I am and what I’ve done for them. Feed My sheep, Peter, if you love Me.”

That’s a very penetrating application for pastors and leaders in Christ’s church. But it applies to each one of us. You cannot love Jesus if you don’t love His flock. The church is the bride of Christ. You can’t love Jesus and say, “But I don’t care about Your bride.” Jesus says, “If you don’t care for her, then you don’t care for Me, because they’re the apple of My eye. They’re graven on My hands. They’re precious in My sight.” Love cares.

And love costs. It’s not mushy and sentimental. It’s costly. It’s courageous. It’s bloody. Look at verses 18 and 19:

“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.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Strong church tradition tells us that around the year 61 A.D., the Apostle Peter was crucified for his faith in Jesus. And when they were getting ready to crucify him, he said, “Not right side up, because I’m not worthy to die as my Lord did. Turn me upside-down.” May we never mock poor Peter or think lowly of such an exemplary brother in Christ. He paid dearly for his love for Jesus. Love is costly.

Finally, love cleaves. It holds tightly to Jesus. When I think of cleaving, I think of marriage. I think of intimacy. I think of a personal union. If you love Jesus, He has a personal path for you to follow that's going to be unique and different than any other believer's path. We don't love Jesus in isolation. We don't love Jesus alone. But we do love Jesus one by one. Jesus has a path for you to follow that's different from your brother or sister in Christ. If you love Jesus, you will cleave to Him on that path, and you won't compare yourself to others and want the path they have. You'll say, "Jesus, I am Yours and You are mine. Let me follow You wherever You lead."

That was a lesson Peter needed to learn and we see it in verses 20-21:

"Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him," he's talking about John, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?'"

"You just said they're going to take me to places I don't want to go. They're going to stretch out my hands, and there's going to be suffering. What about John?" I love Jesus' response. Verse 22: *"Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!'"*

"Don't worry about what I'm doing in other brothers' lives. You—you cleave to Me. Follow Me. If you love Me, walk the path I put in front of you. Know that as you show costly love to Me—as you cleave to Me on this journey, as you endure—you are only loving just a little bit as much as I have loved you on the cross. I love you with an everlasting love. I'm not done with you. What I want to know from you more than anything today is: do you love Me?"

That's Jesus' word to us as well.

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