

While We Wait: Follow
John 21: 1-19

It's not Easter anymore. Days, weeks, have gone by now, and after all that had happened, even after Jesus had appeared to them after his death, the disciples were still waiting to see what the next step should be. So they went back to their beginning – to the sea to fish. Doing what they had been doing almost all their lives, a trade they learned from their fathers and would teach to their sons. It was bittersweet after all they experienced following Jesus for three years. They mourned their friend and but they also had tremendous memories of their times together. Yet they didn't know what to do with all that Jesus had taught them, not even with the miraculous news of the resurrection, so they went back home. And it was there Jesus met them, at the place where they felt safe and comfortable, doing what they knew best.

Scholars maintain that this particular text was not part of the original gospel; it is said to have been added later by an unknown editor, but someone who undoubtedly was close to the disciples, who knew the whole story, who recognized the significance of sharing a meal together, who knew Peter and his betrayal of Jesus, who knew there were many, many unanswered questions. It almost seems that in these verses an attempt was being made to bring it all together, a way of making sense of it all for Jesus' earliest followers and for us today. What does one do with a faith of improbable resurrection?

Did you notice that as excited as the fishermen were about meeting Jesus again they weren't sure how to respond? Yes, he provided yet another miracle catch for them. But how does one relate to someone who was once dead and is now living? That is beyond anything anyone can find plausible. There is no equivalent in the physical world. None! Jesus broke through their hesitation with an invitation to a meal. Just as he ate the last meal of the day with them the night he was arrested, now in a new world where the hope of resurrection and new life reigned, he offered the *first* meal of the day to the disciples. The last time they shared a meal it

was with the knowledge that their time together was short. But now? What does a world look like when resurrection opens the day? What comes next?

After they had finished breakfast Jesus turned his attention to Peter who had always been the most vocal of the disciples, the one who did not hesitate to jump in the middle of things - be it water or a discussion. Brash, impulsive Peter. Of all the disciples, it was he who figured out that Jesus was the Messiah, who boldly pronounced, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!"¹ And it was this confession of faith that Jesus proclaimed was the very foundation of the church. But it was also Peter who denied he even knew Jesus. When Jesus was taken away by the leaders of the Jews, men who were supported by the force of Roman soldiers, Peter said he never knew the man, was definitely not one of his followers. Peter turned his back on Jesus. And now they sat together on a beach after a breakfast of bread and fish. "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"² "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." A most interesting volley of questions and answers filled with word plays and deep in meaning. The first two times Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" he used ἀγαπᾷς agape, a deep, unconditional love. Peter responded with φιλῶ phileo, a friendship type of love. Somewhat like when you dare to risk saying "I love you", and the other person responds with "I like you, too." The third time, however, just as Jesus had met the disciples in their familiar world of fishing, he now met Peter exactly where and how he was. 'Simon bar Jonah, do you love – phileo – me?' 'Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.' Finally Peter, the one who ran away earlier, who denied even knowing Jesus, did not waiver in affirmation of his love.

Each time Peter answered Jesus, Jesus responded with a commandment. "Feed my sheep, tend my lambs." Simple words but in that simplicity was the core of the gospel. Love those who love me, love each other, love all, take care of one other. Jesus had said that was

¹ Matthew 16: 16 NRSV

² Scripture references in this paragraph and the following are based in John 21: 15-17 NRSV

the summary of all the law and commandments - to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind - to love one's neighbors.³ Everything, absolutely everything, revolved - and still revolves - around that love. Yet it was more than a command to love that Jesus gave Peter that day. In reaching out to him, in engaging him in conversation, Jesus pulled him from his self-imposed guilt and from the blame of others and placed him back within community, within *Jesus'* own beloved community. When he returned Peter's identity as a disciple, he also crafted for him a purpose that would become the reason for his life. Flawed, fallible Peter became the reflection of the community of believers that would be God's presence in the world.

Now if only that had been the ending. Wouldn't that have been easy? Jesus came back. Peter re-affirms his love for his Lord. Jesus tells them to show that love to the world. End of story. But when is love simple? Do you remember what it was like to be a child? You knew you loved your mom and dad, and they loved you; for most, life was safe and predictable. It was wonderful to just bask in our families' love. But then adulthood came with a vengeance - with its demands for our time, our abilities, our emotions. Life happened. We learn that love is not ever simple. It is a most amazingly complex, challenging force - and the core of our existence. We learn that in giving we do receive, but that giving of ourselves is both exhilarating and exhausting. We realize that we are more often only capable of the limited love of phileo as Peter declared than the agape to which Jesus called him and calls us. The simple, idealistic love of childhood is replaced by something much more mature, a richer love than we ever knew possible as a child, a love that is often filled with flaws and feeble attempts even as it strives to be a pure and all-encompassing love, a love whose very brokenness and reality give it life.

Jesus told Peter, a man in the prime of his life, who could easily climb aboard boats, haul in heavy nets day after day, who could freely swim in the water, walk on the shore, who

³ from Matthew 22: 37-40

embraced life physically and fully, “Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”⁴ Then he added the call that had begun their time together, “Follow me.”⁵ At the beginning it was an open-ended call, one of endless possibilities, one of a world to be explored. The call remained but was now grounded in the reality of life – in the brokenness and fallibility of people who wanted to love but could not always do so, people whose lives were not free from pain and sorrow, people who were loved by the God of grace who takes us all as we are, where we are and creates a beloved community. The invitation to follow was extended to real people, people like Peter who was often incredibly dense, who was reprimanded by Jesus on more than one occasion, who even turned away from Jesus. To real people like Peter who was also the rock, the one whose confession of faith would be the cornerstone of the church, who would prominently and competently lead the church in those early years. Peter was an exceedingly complex man – full of potential and full of faults. Rather like us, wouldn’t you say?

This last appearance of Jesus was a refresher course for the disciples gathered there. It spoke of the wondrous moments in his ministry in which he showed them over and over his loving grace. It also reminded them of that long-ago first call – ‘Follow me.’ A call made even more powerful and touching because Jesus knew, really knew, these recalcitrant fishermen and yet still trusted them with the most precious thing to him – his lambs, his sheep, the flock of believers, the flock of those who had not yet come to believe and perhaps might never. As Jesus ate a breakfast of bread and fish with them on that morning, he reached out to them once more with an invitation, a recommissioning, “Follow me.” There is a community to build, people to love and nurture. That is our identity as people of faith, that is our reason for being – to be

⁴ John 21:18 NRSV

⁵ John 21:19b NRSV

God's love in this world. And we don't have to be perfect or reach a certain level of accomplishment to do that. Jesus *does* know us – warts and all – and sees the people we can be, the church we can become. Heaven knows, we will stumble. We will make mistakes, we will hurt one another, we will *be* hurt, and we will be completely exhausted at times. But Jesus is standing there watching all our efforts and escapades; and in spite of what he sees on the surface, he opens his arms and says, 'Follow me.' Like he had the disciples bring their catch ashore and add it to the meal he had already prepared, Jesus asks us to bring what we've done, what we have, who we are, and add it to the feast of God's loving grace. To follow Jesus is to understand our limitations, our faults, our failings, and know that God not only loves us but trusts that we can and will embody God's message of love to all the world.

To follow is to be part of a community where we might not always know where we are going. To be in community means we struggle and find strength, we mess up and discover God's grace, we are loved and we learn to love, we find belonging and purpose together. That is the church. Not a group of people who have it all together but those who are fallible and flawed – and still keep on trying, who still desire to follow the God of resurrection and new life. Soren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher and theologian, wrote, "God creates out of nothing. Wonderful you say. Yes, to be sure but [God] does what is still more wonderful"; [God] makes saints out of sinners."⁶ That's what God did with Peter, a fisherman who did not seem to have *any* leadership qualities but became *the* leader of that early church. That is what God does with each of us. That is what God is doing with this community of faith – with *all* who follow. When we do so, when we put love into action, we are not only becoming God's beloved community, we are welcoming the world into that community of love and grace.

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<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/the.most.beautiful.things.in.life.are.to.be.lived.9.quotes.from.christian.soren.kierkegaard/108463.htm>

So we have no excuses. We can't say that we have messed up too many times or made too many mistakes, that we don't have what it takes, that we don't know where we are going, that we will surely fail. We can't say that we are too small, too poor, too old, too whatever. Because it is then Jesus looks at us, reaches out his hand, and answers, 'I *do* know who you are. Follow me.' Let us pray.

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to [follow] with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁷

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⁷ As found in *the Lutheran Book of Worship*, Augsburg, 1978. Adaptation mine.