

Today we celebrate Easter and the central belief of the Christian faith: that Jesus was raised from the dead. In doing so, God set in motion new creation, a new beginning that takes its cue from Jesus. Because Jesus rose from the dead, the past is in the past, and the future has a purpose.

What do you remember about Easter? As a child, I remember the baskets of chocolate. I don't remember believing in the Easter Bunny and why we got chocolate, but you learn early in life not to question free candy!

More poignantly, my memories of Easter are shaped by our time in France. We had a regular routine with our church community: Maundy Thursday/Good Friday service; family picnic with Easter egg hunt for children on Saturday morning; a seder meal on Saturday night. Sunday began early with a sunrise service outside of town. We then drove back into town and worshipped with the French church. Following that gathering, a unique experience occurred. Many of the churches would walk to the courtyard opposite the main cathedral in town. The pastors and priests would together climb a stage and share readings, prayers, and blessings for the city as part of the Easter celebration.

One year, my co-pastor snuck us on stage. We stood in the back of the stage, hoping not to be noticed. It was a surreal moment standing on that stage and looking at the faces of people in our city from a variety of religious experiences, with a 1,600 year old church building in the background, with an understanding of the history of Catholic and Protestant conflict in France, with the history of Protestant movement led by Europeans—all of that coming together on that Easter stage as we announced to the city the hope available to them because of Easter. The past and the future collided in the present.

It's easy to nod at Easter, keeping the day at arm's length. But the resurrection of Jesus impacts us today. Today has meaning for both our past and our future. We're going to read an encounter that Jesus had with His disciples a short time after His resurrection. In this encounter, Jesus has a conversation with Peter and will say two words to Peter that will put Peter's past in the past, and fill his future with a purpose beyond himself. As Peter wrestles with what those two words mean for him, they carry incredible meaning for us as well.

Before we get to the two words, some background on the situation in which Jesus talks with Peter.

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing (John 21:1-3).

Jesus appears to His disciples. This is the third time in John that Jesus has appeared to His disciples after the resurrection. The first was after Mary ran back from the tomb, the second was so that Thomas—who missed the first appearance—would believe. Seven disciples are present in this scene, with Peter and Thomas listed prominently.

Two situations occur next that recall similar experiences that the disciples had with Jesus in the past, and point toward the shape of their future because of the resurrection.

### **What Happens When the Disciples Obey the Call of Jesus?**

**Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.**

**He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"**

**"No," they answered.**

**He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.**

**Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread (verses 4-9).**

The seven disciples, led by Peter, are out all night fishing. They catch nothing. Imagine them tired, hungry, and probably frustrated by the lack of success. Remember these are men who did this for a living before they met Jesus. As they are just out from shore, a man walking on the beach calls out to them. The question is framed in the original language to expect a negative

response. In essence, this stranger says, "Hey, you haven't caught anything, have you?" What an odd comment by a stranger! If you were there, tired and frustrated, you might wonder, "Is this stranger questioning our ability to do our job?" The stranger then goes further and gives unsolicited advice on how they could improve their fishing—throw the net over the right side of the boat. Think about this: how many times during the night did the disciples throw their net over the right hand side of the boat?

Yet, the disciples do something more than you and I would do in that situation: they obey the call of this stranger. And when they obey, they experience an abundance that is beyond their ability. It could only be the power of God in their midst. Their eyes are opened to see that the stranger on the beach is not a stranger, but Jesus.

Peter and the disciples encountered a similar situation several years earlier. In Luke 5, some of these same disciples are fishing all night and catch nothing. Jesus calls them to cast their net out again. Though they had tried all night, they obeyed. Their obedience was met with the blessing of God. Peter particularly is stunned by God's power, and he realizes that God is at work in the world through Jesus. What happens when the disciples obey the call of Jesus? God's power enters the world.

### **What Happens When the Disciples Join with Jesus?**

**Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead (verses 10-14).**

When they reach the shore, Jesus invites them to breakfast. How amazing is that: when we consider all of the things that Jesus could do and say in a situation like this, He invites people to breakfast; He has a meal with his friends. Don't discount the power and the potential for holiness in a meal.

It's interesting how Jesus has fish already on the fire, but also invites the disciples to bring their fish. Peter's eagerness shines again: Jesus asks for some fish, and Peter pulls the entire net ashore. Jesus takes what He has and what the disciples bring—the bread and fish—and gives it to His friends.

This recalls a similar situation in Matthew 14 when Jesus fed the five thousand in the same way. On that day, Jesus took the little amount that the disciples had, and combined with His power, a miracle occurred. That miracle in a large crowd several years earlier is now taking place again in a small circle a few days after

Easter. When what Jesus has is met with what the disciples bring, God's miracles alter the world.

What happens when the disciples obey the call of Jesus? God's power enters the world. What happens when the disciples join with Jesus in His work? God's miracles alter the world. These followers needed to experience those lessons again. What they would do in the years to come would only happen when what they had was met by with what Jesus provided. The resurrection of Jesus meant the beginning of new creation and their future of announcing Easter in their world.

With that as a backdrop, we are drawn into a more pointed conversation between Jesus and Peter. It is a conversation that will dramatically impact Peter's past and his future.

### **Jesus Questions Peter's Devotion**

**When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"**

**"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."**

**Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."**

**Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"**

**He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."**

**Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."**

**The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"**

**Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."**

**Jesus said, "Feed my sheep" (verses 15-17).**

Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love Me more than these?" Who are, "these"? It could be Peter's former way of life, "Peter do you love Me more than these things (your former way of life.?)" It could refer to Peter's friendship with the disciples: "Peter, do you love Me more than you love these disciples?" Probably "these" refers to Peter's devotion to Jesus over and above the devotion of the other disciples to Jesus. In other words, "Peter, do you love Me more than these disciples love me?"

It is a relevant question for Peter. He had boasted of his exceptional devotion (Matt 26.33, Mark 14.29, Jn 13.37, Jn. 15.12-13) and claimed that his love for Jesus was greater than anyone else. But in reality, Peter's devotion was the same as everyone else: he failed when it mattered most. As Jesus was being sentenced to death, three times Peter was asked if he belonged to Jesus. Three times, Peter denied any association (John 18.17, 25, 27). Peter's intended devotion was overtaken by his actual failure.

We understand that. We can relate to Peter. We've had big dreams and plans, but at times failed to live up to our hopes. We've boasted of our attributes, only to realize we are not as

strong as we thought we would be. We've known people who have professed their faithfulness to us, only to let us down. Peter is at once both who we fear ourselves to be, and what we fear others will be toward us. "Do you love Me?"

### ...apart from his pretense...

Jesus then asks Peter a second time, "Do you love Me?" Interestingly, Jesus uses the name, "Simon Son of John." Peter was not always called Peter but rather Simon. He wasn't always a disciple of Jesus but grew up as the son of a father named John. It is as if Jesus goes back into Peter's past, far before Peter met Jesus. Jesus draws in Peter's beginning, his heritage, his family. Apart from everything that has happened, apart from all his pretense, reaching all the way back into Peter's past, Jesus poses a deeply personal question. With everything that has happened, with everything that you are, "Do you love Me?"

### ...despite his failure

For the third time, Jesus poses the question of Peter's devotion. Peter is grieved that three times Jesus questioned his devotion. But it is a needed grief. In asking this question three times, Jesus draws upon Peter's deepest failure—his threefold denial of Christ—in order to show that there is not only a second chance, but also a third chance for Peter. He is given the opportunity for a new start with Jesus. Up to this point, Peter had constructed an idea of how Jesus should be, what Jesus should do. Peter had never wanted a crucified Jesus, and now he is face-to-face with the resurrected Jesus. What will Peter do with Jesus? As one commentator observed, "Was [Peter] ready to love Jesus as He was, and not as Peter wished him to be?" (Leon Morris).

Three times Jesus asks, Do you love me? Notice also that each question is linked to a task: Jesus charges Peter to take care of His sheep. This is shepherding language, associated with the role of Jesus (John 10). Peter is given a task for the future, and it is the task of Jesus. Peter is called to announce that God's new way is happening in Jesus. Devotion is linked with a task. As someone once observed, "Love brought Peter a task and a cross" (Barclay).

**Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God (verses 18-19a).**

Peter restates his devotion to Jesus, and in response Jesus gives a future glimpse of what this devotion will mean for Peter. Historical tradition states that Peter would later be crucified because of his faith. You can go to Rome today and visit the small, tomb-like prison in which Peter was kept before his martyrdom. But before that final day, Peter has a life to live. Jesus says two words to Peter that put his past in the past and brings his future into focus so that Easter could be a new start for Peter.

### Then he said to him, "Follow me!" (v. 19b).

Peter's devotion and task are summarized in those two words: "Follow Me." These two words mean two things for Peter. First, Jesus says Peter can start again despite Peter's past. He restores Peter from a past littered with broken promises and failed devotion. These two words announce grace to Peter. Peter, who failed, is not a failure. His past is in the past because of the resurrected Jesus.

Second, not only does "follow Me" put Peter's past in the past, but it also points toward an immense future for Peter. It means his future can be lived in the way of Jesus. It can have significance and meaning beyond himself. He can spend his life living like Jesus lived, in a life that participates in resurrection—the new creation that God has initiated in the world through Jesus. Peter can live a life that will echo into eternity.

Would Peter obey the call of Jesus? Would Peter join with Jesus in announcing Easter to a world in desperate need of new creation? It all started with Peter stepping into two words: "Follow Me."

This is what we could easily miss about Easter: that Jesus is raised from the dead means that your past is in the past. There is grace and forgiveness because of His death on the cross. And there is a life waiting for you because Jesus was raised to life. It is the task of announcing Easter, of bringing new creation into the world.

To obey the call of Jesus, to join with Him in bringing new creation in our world, only happens because of Easter. The resurrection means two things for you. First, your past is in the past. Easter is the present promise that your past does not determine your future. Maybe like Peter, you have failed. Maybe like Peter, your eagerness is a mask for your shame. The new life of Jesus on Easter means that you can live a new life. There is grace and forgiveness in Jesus. That is what Peter experienced and what is offered to you. Your past can be in the past because of what Jesus has done for you.

Second, the resurrection of Jesus means that your future can be spent on a life worth living. You can join with Jesus in bringing about Easter in your world. There are places and people living pre-Easter realities. Who are the people that God has put you among that need to experience restoration, comfort, love, rest? What are the places—work, communities—in which you are a member that need to experience the power and miracle of God because you pray, build and create? Where God has placed you is an opportunity for you to announce Easter in word and deed. Easter challenges us to go about the work of bringing a glimpse in our world of what will one day be in full in God's world. If you do that, your labor is not in vain.

You can pray for healing—because one day there will be no sickness, so our prayers are not in vain. You can comfort the dying—because one day death will be no more, so our comfort is not in vain. You can pursue forgiveness in your relationships—because

one day there be no tears, so our conflict resolution is not in vain. You can paint, sing, plant, and build to bring new creation into this world—because one day God will make all things new, and our creative acts are not in vain. You can declare that we can have relationship with God—because one day He will be with us, and us with Him, so our proclamation is not in vain. That's what it means to obey Jesus' words: Follow Me.

The resurrection of Jesus is why I'm excited about our future at the Fox in downtown Redwood City. We will be present in the city, working for the good of the city. We will be announcing

Easter to people who have never heard the story of Jesus as well as those who continue to hear.

That's the call for us as a church. But you personally have a call to follow Jesus. How you lived yesterday doesn't have to be how you will live tomorrow. You can live tomorrow with a purpose beyond yourself. But it all starts with Jesus. How will you respond to His call to "Follow me"?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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