

# Regret, Restoration and Renewal

## John 21:1-19

Second Sunday of Easter. We're staying in John's gospel for another post-resurrection conversation: the risen Christ with Peter. Last week we looked at Mary Magdalene's conversation with the risen Christ. One of the great gifts of John's gospel is that he gives us these detailed one-on-one conversations. We see them throughout his gospel: for example, with Nicodemus at night (which results in the great "For God so loved the world..." saying, John 3:16), with Martha after Lazarus had died (which results in the great "I am the resurrection and the life..." saying); then, of course, with Mary Magdalene who came to the tomb; and now, with Peter. Like Jesus' post-resurrection conversation with Mary, this is a moving conversation and exchange.

Before reading the passage, I'd like us to take a moment and imagine Peter's state of heart and mind. Just a few days earlier he denied his friend and leader, who was then crucified, and the last we saw of Peter was when he ran away weeping bitterly.

Now, Jesus has appeared to the disciples twice already, so there is affirmation of his victory—after some time of wondering and emotional

processing; all of the gospels record the first witnesses as having a bit of a challenge with this new reality of someone they love having died, and now coming back to life and appearing to them.

But by now some time has passed and the apostolic band of men and women are rejoicing that Christ is alive—*except for Peter*. Rattling around in the back of Peter’s mind is the fact that he failed. And not just a small “oops” but a big relational failure. He chickened out at a time of testing and lacked courage and honesty—he lied about his association with Jesus. So, in spite of the resurrection, Peter is still unresolved internally.

And, I think it’s safe to say that he’s depressed. He’s certainly dejected, bummed out. And now, in our gospel account this morning from John, Jesus is going to give Peter some special attention.

In the other gospels it says, “Christ appeared to the disciples... and to Peter.” Even Matthew, Mark, and Luke emphasize that Jesus took special notice of Peter after the resurrection. John, however, gives us the full scoop...

## **John 21:1-19**

**21** After these things (the doubting Thomas account) Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this

way.<sup>2</sup>Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.<sup>3</sup>Simon 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.<sup>4</sup>Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.<sup>5</sup>Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No."<sup>6</sup>He 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.<sup>7</sup>That 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 sea.<sup>8</sup>But 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.<sup>9</sup>When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.<sup>10</sup>Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."<sup>11</sup>So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.<sup>12</sup>Jesus 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.<sup>13</sup>Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.<sup>14</sup>This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

<sup>15</sup>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."<sup>16</sup>A 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."<sup>17</sup>He 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."<sup>18</sup>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."<sup>19</sup>(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

This is the word of the Lord.

What do you do with your regrets? We all have them—small ones, big ones. Your regret may be from something you did or didn't do yesterday. Or it could be from something you or didn't do did 20 years ago or more. What do we do with those regrets? Are they rattling around in the back of your mind & in your consciousness? Have they been resolved? Let's see how Jesus works with someone who has regret.

Peter is dejected, we could even say he's depressed. And as people might do when they're feeling that way, he returns to what he reflexively knows to do: "I'm going fishing." It's just reflexive. He doesn't know what else to do. You can imagine Peter saying, "It's nice that Jesus is raised, but so what?? I'm still a failure." You get the sense that Peter is a bit lost. He's adrift. Remember, he's the one who said to Jesus, "Everyone else may desert you, but I never will." Peter is the one who said, "I'll die with you" but when the time of testing came, he chickened out. He failed. He's the one who, when Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" said, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." That was a good moment! So, after denying Jesus 3 times and running away from the scene, imagine how he must feel about himself...

Jesus now goes to work on restoring Peter.

To start the whole thing off Jesus does the same thing here with Peter that he did when he first called him to follow 3 years earlier. So, let's have a brief flashback—if we're watching a movie, this is a short flashback scene from the beginning of the gospels, when Peter first meets Jesus: Peter is fishing, catches nothing, and Jesus comes up to them and tells him to put his net out into deep water, and when he did he hauled in huge catch. Jesus won Peter over on a fishing trip. And after that—or as a result of it—Peter leaves his nets (drops everything) and decides to follow him. And now, 3 years later, Jesus wins Peter *back* in the exact same way: on a little fishing adventure.

So now, in a way, Jesus is saying, “Hey Peter—it's me again!” And, “Peter, I'm going to call you to follow me all over again. We're going to start over.” In fact, Jesus' last words to Peter here are exactly the same as his first words to him three years earlier: follow me. This is a kind of re-booting of his life with Jesus. A refreshing of his call to follow.

That's how the restoration process begins. Then Jesus addresses Peter in a more intimate way. Let's take a look at this restoration and renewal of Peter. And watch Jesus, the master, go to work.

Here are 3 observations from our text in John 21, which I hope might be helpful to you if you struggle with regrets or what we might call *interior* doubt—that is, doubts about yourself or your worthiness. There are different kind of doubt: *Intellectual* doubt asks ‘Is it true or not?’ *Moral* doubt asks ‘Is it beneficial or not?’ or ‘Does it have a good effect?’ *Interior* doubt asks ‘Am I worthy?’ or ‘Is it true *for me*?’ That is what we’re talking about here.

1. First, Jesus does not confront Peter about his past failure. He doesn’t say anything about it. He stays in the present. All Jesus seems to care about is the NOW, this present moment, not what happened the week before. So, Jesus doesn’t say, “Simon Peter, are you truly sorry for what you’ve done?” I’m pretty sure he knows the answer to that already. Jesus doesn’t ask, “Why did you deny me?” That would lead Peter down a road of misery and only affirm his state of mind and solidify his belief about himself, that he’s a failure. Imagine if Jesus *had* asked that question (‘why did you do that?’). What’s Peter supposed to say to that question? “Well, because I have no courage, I’m a coward...” That’s really bad self-talk. So Jesus doesn’t go there. What’s done is done. It’s time to address where we are, now, and move forward.

And Jesus knows what's on *our* heart and mind. If we're truly sorry, he knows it. If we want to make things right, he knows it. He's not going to re-hash what we've done. He will meet us where we are, now, and move forward. If we have events of the past popping up in our mind and making us feel guilty, that's not from God. The Holy Spirit (the Spirit of the risen Christ) is always about the present, and about next steps forward in the renewal and restoration of our lives. He knows our heart, and the goodness contained in it. And that is what he works with.

So, there is no talk of past failure. Only steps forward in renewal and restoration.

2. Second, Jesus asks questions. He doesn't make statements. We see this throughout Jesus' earthly ministry. He loves to ask questions. It's part of his teaching style.

So, he draws Peter out with a question: do you love me? And it is healing for Peter to say the words, out loud, "Yes, I do love you." Jesus is not questioning Peter as if he's not sure about Peter's love and the desire of his heart. He is restoring Peter to a relationship with himself, and giving him a place of leadership. And so he needs to ask him this question, and let him say the words himself and affirm the truth of what's in his heart: that his failure

does not define him, his love for his master and friend Jesus does. And that's a good thing for us to remember when we fail. *We* are not a failure. That isn't what we ARE. It's something we *do* from time to time, but it is not our identity. Our identity is that we are children of God and beloved of Jesus.

And Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than *these*?" What are "these" that Jesus is referring to? Most likely, the fish. You can picture Jesus pointing to them. It's a kind of silly question (do you love me more than dead stinky fish), but it harkens back to Jesus' statement from an earlier point in his teaching: whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy to be my disciple—a little bit of rabbinic preacher's hyperbole there, to make a point. And the point, or the real question underneath the question is, do I have priority in your life? Will I continue to have priority in your life, even after a failure, so I can restore you fully? Instead of reflexively defaulting to something else that doesn't really help resolve you internally. Maybe it brings temporary relief, or distraction, but not inward resolution.

Let's think about this. Peter is a fisherman. That's his vocation and what he has done for a living his whole life, and it's what he has enjoyed. So of course he's going to be enamored with fish and fishing. That's probably why we get this odd

comment that there are exactly 153 fish; many people have tried to fix some symbolic or prophetic significance to this number. No. It's 153 fish! They're fishermen, and what do fishermen do? They count the fish they caught (or, they weigh them...). And it's a lot!

153 fish is impressive and got their attention—again, like the first time Jesus helped them bring in a boat load of fish three years earlier.

Anyway, Peter is a fisherman so Jesus needs to ask him—do you love me more than these fish and the fishing that you so love to do? It would be like asking a dejected biker, who just got on his Harley after a failure and went for a long ride on the Olympic Peninsula, “Do you love me? And do you love me more than this Harley?” For the veterinarian, do you love me more than these animals? Etc. Again, the real question is, do I have priority in your life?

So part of Peter's restoration is having him make a statement of fidelity to his friend and his leader, in response to a question. And to restore Jesus to a place of priority in his life. When he could've easily defaulted to something else and just given up.

And the question is, “Do you love me?” not “Do you believe in me?” The question is not “Will you do great things for me now (and not deny me again)?”

He doesn't ask Peter for a promise never to fail again. Of course he's going to.

We read about that in the book of Acts. Peter gets some correction in there for doing dumb things. So, Jesus doesn't ask any of those other questions.

Jesus simply asks, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?  
(three times, to match the threefold denial of Peter).

And whether we've failed or not, or have regrets or not, this is the question that Jesus asks of all of us this Easter season: do you love me? Do I have priority in your life? Your sins are forgiven, your past is truly past and not held against you. I am alive, and with you always. Now—will you put a relationship with me as your priority? Then...

3. As part of his restoration, Jesus gives Peter something to do. Three times Jesus charges him with the task of taking care of the flock (feed my sheep, tend my lambs—three ways of saying the same thing). This gives Peter meaning, purpose, a calling. When he's dejected, depressed, Jesus adds substance to Peter's life by giving him something significant to do, in serving and leading Jesus' followers. In a way, Jesus is saying to Peter, "I need you. Others need you. Don't go down a path of despair, don't give up; you're needed."

And some of us have perhaps heard it said, that when we're depressed sometimes it's good to be given something meaningful to do; to help others, and give ourselves away. To take the focus off of ourselves from time to time, and look to others who also need help. Because we are needed!

I'm no psychotherapist and I'm not proscribing anything here, but simply making the observation that when Jesus restores Peter and lifts him out of his funk, part of this restoration involves giving him a renewed vision for his life, and significant work to do, because he was needed.

Even that strange and curious sentence by Jesus at the end about how Peter will die seems to play into this strategy of Peter's restoration. I don't think that Jesus is just telling Peter: "Courage, man! You're going to live to a ripe old age. So old that people will push you around in your wheelchair, taking you places you don't want to go." That's not what Jesus is saying. And that's not how they treated their elderly back then anyway. Most commentators believe that this cryptic line by Jesus is a foretelling of Peter's death by suffering and imprisonment, and even crucifixion: "when you are old you will stretch out your hands (hint, hint) and someone else will put a belt around you (could also be

translated “bind you” which would make sense, because Jesus was bound when he was arrested, as prisoners are) and lead you where you don’t want to go.”

Whatever this strange sentence means, it still signifies that Peter’s life from here forward is going to have purpose and substance—even if it isn’t pleasant. This sentence seems strange to us comfort-loving Americans, but if we put ourselves in Peter’s place and especially in a first century world view, it’s not that strange. Remember, Peter is the one who pledged to be loyal to Jesus to the death. And now Jesus says that pledge will be fulfilled. And for Peter this was a great boost. He does get to die for his Lord. This probably excites Peter and refuels his passion and purpose. Because...

From here on—in the book of Acts—we see a new Peter: confident, and on a mission. Who will still make mistakes, but who doesn’t let his mistakes define him; but learns and grows. Which is what we do when we have a good solid sense of ourselves and our belovedness; mistakes and failures don’t take us out—they strengthen us.

So, what do we do with our regrets? Part of our answer might be to simply let Jesus take us aside, refresh our call to follow him, and ask us the question: do you love me? And if our answer is yes, we love him, then we let him wash our

regrets away, and receive his grace and mercy and take up the calling to follow him with new resolve and with renewed purpose.

Remembering that he is not going to bring up the past, or remind us of any failures; he's only concerned about your future.