John 21:1-19

1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2 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. 3 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.

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

5 Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.”

6 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.

7 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.

8 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 meters off.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” 11 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. 12 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. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with
the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 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.”

16 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.”

17 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. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to 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.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”
Like It Never Even Happened

“Like it never even happened” [SLIDE] is the slogan for a cleanup and restoration company in the United States. If your home suffers severe fire or water damage, they promise to come in and clean it up like it never even happened. Their commercials are pretty clever [VIDEO].

As a former copywriter, I have to say that I’m impressed by the slogan. If your home is damaged in a fire or flood or some other disaster, all you want is for everything to be restored as it was, like it never even happened. You want the hole in the ceiling repaired. You want the floor to be clean and dry like it was. You want complete and total restoration.

That’s what happens in this passage from John 21. Peter, who committed what he thought was an unforgivable sin by denying Jesus, is completely restored by the grace and forgiveness of the risen Lord. Jesus forgives him with such totality it’s as though his denials never even happened.

This passage is the epilogue to the Gospel of John [SLIDE]. An epilogue is a final scene that comments on or summarizes all that has gone before. To be honest, this epilogue feels out of place. Consider what happens in the previous chapter. Last week we read John’s account of the resurrection, which takes up most of chapter 20. After Jesus appears to Mary, he appears twice to the disciples, once without Thomas, who doubts that the disciples have really seen Jesus resurrected, and a second time with Thomas in the room. It’s during this second appearance to Thomas that Jesus demonstrates the reality of his resurrection from the dead by inviting Thomas to place his hand in his wounds. Jesus concludes by saying to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (Jn. 20:29).
Then chapter 20, and the entire Gospel, ends with what seems like finality [SLIDE]:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (Jn. 20:30-31).

That sure sounds like an ending, but chapter 21 begins, “After these things...” (Jn. 21:1). What are some of “these things”? After the resurrected Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, after Jesus appeared to all the disciples except Thomas, after Jesus appeared again to all the disciples but with Thomas also present...after all these things Jesus appears to a handful of the disciples one more time. The setting this time is not Jerusalem, as in chapter 20, but Galilee [SLIDE], the disciples’ and Jesus’ own home region. They are fishing on the Sea of Tiberias, another name for the Sea of Galilee. This is the same body of water where Jesus spoke and calmed the violent storm, much to the disciples’ amazement. It’s the same body of water on whose surface Jesus walked and from which he rescued Peter when Peter tried to walk on the water toward Jesus. It’s the same body of water from which Jesus called Peter out of his fishing boat and told him that he would make him fish for people.

But now in this passage, in John’s epilogue, Peter has returned to familiar surroundings and has resumed the life that he had left behind. He’s not going through towns and villages proclaiming the gospel and fishing for people; he’s back on the same old lake fishing for fish. It’s as if the resurrection never even happened. After the initial excitement of having seen the resurrected Jesus in the flesh, with the wounds of the nails still in his hands and side, Peter has resumed his old ways. Easter Sunday was great, but then came Monday.

We may feel the same sense of post-Easter disappointment. Last week was the high point of the church calendar—the biggest holy day of the year—bigger even than
Christmas. We heard the good news: Jesus Christ is risen! The tomb was empty! God reached into the grave and did the impossible: God raised Jesus from the dead! Our spirits were raised as well. We felt renewed, energized. We left church with the words “Christ the Lord is risen today” ringing in our ears.

But eventually Easter Sunday gave way to another mundane Monday. Like Peter, we returned to our familiar routines. The words of the hymn faded, taken over by the steady hum of another week of school, work, or household chores. “I am going fishing,” Peter said. And so did we, back to our familiar spot on the lake.

Peter tries fishing but doesn’t catch anything. None of the disciples do. They spend all night fishing but come up empty. Like Peter, we may feel that the old routine is a fruitless endeavor. We cast our nets over the side, but when we haul them up they’re empty. They were filled to bursting on Easter Sunday… but that was then. Easter was a long time ago. Now we’re back in the real world. How can that be? How can life after Easter feel just like life before Easter?

The world for Peter and the disciples in those first weeks after Easter looked a lot like the weeks before they met Jesus. They couldn’t listen to him preach to the crowds because he was no longer there to preach. They couldn’t learn from his private teaching to them because he wasn’t there to teach. They couldn’t witness him proclaim the kingdom of God through miracles because he wasn’t there to do them. They couldn’t share a table with him as they did on the night of the Last Supper because… well… that was his last supper.

Jesus had given the disciples their identities. He had transformed them from fishermen into disciples, but without a teacher to lead them, they were no longer disciples. Without their teacher to guide them, who then were they? Perhaps it’s for this reason that Peter and the other disciples return to what they know best…fishing.
I mentioned last week that all four Gospels tell the story of the resurrection, and each in its own way. We read from John, but I want to take a moment to consider one aspect of Luke’s account of the resurrection [SLIDE]. In Luke’s version, Mary Magdalene doesn’t go to the tomb alone; she is accompanied by several other women. There at the tomb they don’t find the body of Jesus, but they do encounter two angels who tell them that he has risen. The women collectively go and tell the disciples what they heard from the angels, but as Luke writes, “these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Lk. 24:11). The disciples think that this talk of resurrection is just the ravings of some overly sensitive women with fervid imaginations.

But not all of the disciples share that opinion. Not all of them think that the women tell an idle tale. In one of them, a hope is kindled. Listen to how Luke describes Peter’s reaction to the news of Jesus’ resurrection: “But Peter got up and ran to the tomb” (Lk. 24:12). Peter wastes no time. He cannot contain himself. He immediately gets up and goes as fast as he can to the tomb. Luke makes no mention of another disciple running with him as we heard in John. In Luke’s telling, Peter goes alone.

What would compel Peter to run to the tomb? Why could he not wait to find out for himself if what the women had said was true? I believe that Peter raced to the tomb in search of something—not only to see if what the women had said was indeed true—but for what it would mean if it were true. If Jesus had been raised from the dead, it would mean that Peter might receive the one thing that only Jesus could give him and for which he longed...forgiveness.

I don’t know how fast of a runner Peter was, but I imagine that as he raced to the tomb he was slowed down by the weight of guilt that he was carrying. Peter, ever the boldest of the disciples, the one most sure of himself, the one who was confident that even if all the other disciples deserted Jesus he never would, the one who promised Jesus that even if he had to die with him he would never deny him, did
just that...deny him...not once, not twice, but three times.

Peter carried with him to the tomb the weight of that guilt and shame. He continued to carry it even after Jesus visited the house where the disciples were and showed them the wounds in his hands from the crucifixion nails, even after Jesus extended to them his peace, even after he breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit [SLIDE]. Peter continued to be burdened by guilt and shame even after Jesus said to him and to all the disciples, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn. 20:23). I wonder if Peter realized that those words were spoken for him, for Peter had retained his own sins. He simply didn’t have it in himself to forgive himself for denying his teacher. There was no way for him to lessen, let alone unburden himself, of his guilt.

Guilt is a complex emotion. There are two types of guilt [SLIDE]. There is a guilt that is introspective and reflective, that honestly reckons with the cause of guilt, that seeks to learn from it and that responds to it by seeking to make amends. This type of guilt is proactive; it motivates the one who is guilty to confess and repent and therefore seek restoration.

But there is another type of guilt. There is a guilt that goes beyond introspection and reflection to self-loathing. This is a guilt that says “What I have done is unforgivable.” This guilt is not active but passive. It wallows in shame and disgrace. It does not motivate the guilty to confess and repent but instead paralyzes them in feelings of worthlessness. It therefore makes restoration impossible. It is a kind of death, not a physical death but a psychological one [SLIDE].

After his three denials of Jesus, the Peter whom we knew earlier had died. That Peter was bold to the point of reckless and filled with self-confidence. Even when Jesus said to the disciples during the Last Supper that they would all desert him that night, Peter professed, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert
you” (Mt. 27:33). When Jesus told Peter directly that he would deny him three times that very night, Peter could not conceive of such a thing. With his typical brashness he declared, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” (Mt. 27:35).

Peter was right about the first part of that sentence but not the second. Peter did die a kind of death with Jesus that night. However, he did not die in faithfulness with Jesus to the very end, boldly standing alongside him at the hour of his arrest, as he imagined himself doing. Peter died denying Jesus. The understanding that Peter had of himself as Jesus’ faithful disciple died. The Peter who had left his fishing boat to follow Jesus, the Peter who had asked Jesus to call him to step from the safety of the boat to walk on the water, the Peter who was so sure of his own faithfulness to Jesus died that night. After his third denial, when Peter heard the cock crow, “he went out and wept bitterly” (Mt. 26:75). Peter wept not for Jesus but for himself. He wept because his image of himself had been destroyed.

As sinners no less than Peter, for we have also denied Jesus—not three times but countless times—wouldn’t we also race to the tomb even on a just a rumor, an idle tale? Wouldn’t we leap from our boat into the water if we thought that we saw Jesus standing on the shore, if we thought that there was still a chance that he would forgive us for our faithlessness and our lack of courage?

That’s what Peter does when he hears Jesus’ familiar voice calling to him and the other disciples from the shore [SLIDE]. He doesn’t hesitate but immediately dives into the water and swims ashore to where Jesus is waiting. Peter and the other disciples then share breakfast with Jesus. It’s their first meal together since the night of the Last Supper, when Jesus told Peter that he would deny him three times. The disciples are once again gathered around him sharing a meal. Jesus once again breaks the bread and gives it to each of them.
Let’s be clear about what Jesus is doing: he is intentionally calling to mind the Last Supper. Call it the first breakfast. He then turns to Peter, as he did that night, but this time he doesn’t predict Peter’s denials, he asks him a question. The passage is told with great power and intensity, so I’m just going to read it as it was written [SLIDE]:

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.” [SLIDE]

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.” [SLIDE]

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.

By asking Peter three times whether he loves him, Jesus has recreated the conditions of Peter’s worst failure, not to remind him of it but to free him from it. Jesus wants to free Peter from his guilt and shame because he is not done with Peter. He has plans for Peter, this foolish, ignorant, weak disciple. He will use this failed man, this sinner,
to lead his church. The man who three times denied that he knew Jesus will boldly proclaim his name in the halls of power of Jerusalem and Rome. And he will even one day do that which he had promised Jesus—die with him, for Peter would eventually die a martyr’s death, as Jesus tells him here in this passage.

Yet Peter is slow to pick up on what Jesus is doing. I love how John describes Peter as being hurt because Jesus asked him a third time, “Do you love me?” Peter is hurt because he is a wounded man. He is no longer the Peter who was full of reckless self-confidence. That Peter has died. But with these three affirmations, Jesus resurrects Peter from the dead. Peter is raised not to the form that he was, but to something new. The new Peter is wounded but wiser. Ironically, he is strengthened by his failure. He is stronger because he failed. For in denying Jesus, Peter has finally learned what the kingdom of God is all about—not glory but grace—a grace that is all-encompassing and all forgiving. A grace that is wide enough to cover all of Peter’s sin and all of our sin. A grace that is deep enough to reach down to our lowest depths and raise us to new life. A grace that says to us, even in the face of our sin, “Follow me.” You see, God’s love and grace and forgiveness are stronger than even our worst sin.

Like Peter, we are sinners. In one form or another we have repeatedly denied Jesus. Our lives are stained with sin, damaged seemingly beyond repair, but the blood of Jesus Christ wipes clean the stain of all our sin...like it never even happened.