

Holy Week Series: Following Peter as He Struggles to Make Sense of Jesus
Part Four: Alienation or Reconciliation?
Matthew 16.21-23, 26.69-75; Mark 16.1-7; John 21.1-17

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When we get to the message on Easter Sunday we usually focus on the historical events that we've just been singing about, how, at dawn the women go out to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, who had died on the cross, and when they get to the tomb into which the body of Jesus had been placed they discover the entrance stone has been rolled back and the body is gone, and a heavenly messenger is sitting there saying, "He is not here! He is risen!"

And then later that evening, how Jesus, risen from the dead, appears to the disciples, and then when he appears to them again a week later. Jesus was dead, and now he is alive!

In Matthew 27 we're told that when they put the body of Jesus in the tomb they put a seal on the tomb to ensure that it would remain closed. What does it mean for us today that that seal has been broken, and that Jesus stepped out of the tomb alive?

I love that the gospel writers don't just leave us with the facts of the resurrection, to figure out the significance for ourselves. They give us one more story to consider before the gospels come to an end, a story that helps us to understand at least one huge implication of the resurrection.

That last little story at the very end of the four gospels, it answers at least one part of the what difference does it make question in a powerful way.

Before we get there, let me give you just a bit of context. We've been walking through Holy Week with our focus on one of the disciples in particular, Peter, the former fisherman, as he struggles to make sense of who Jesus is and where things are going.

Let's go back to the last time Peter appeared in the story as it unfolds, in the Garden of Gethsemane, late Thursday night. You may remember that Peter pulled out a sword and he attacked those who were coming to arrest Jesus.

All four gospels tell what happened next. We'll pick up the story in Matthew chapter 26.

Matthew 26.57-58

Then the people who had arrested Jesus led him to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of religious law and the elders had

gathered. Meanwhile, Peter followed him at a distance and came to the high priest's courtyard. He went in and sat with the guards and waited to see how it would all end.

At this point in Matthew's telling of it, the scene shifts, and the story moves to the inner courts where Jesus is being accused and interrogated and beaten by the religious authorities as a false Messiah. Then the focus shifts back outside.

Matthew 26.69-74

Meanwhile, Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl came over and said to him, "You were one of those with Jesus the Galilean."

But Peter denied it in front of everyone. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

Later, out by the gate, another servant girl noticed him and said to those standing around, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."

Again Peter denied it, this time with an oath. "I don't even know the man," he said.

A little later, some of the other bystanders came over to Peter and said, "You must be one of them; we can tell by your Galilean accent."

Peter swore, "A curse on me if I'm lying—I don't know the man!"

Then moving to Luke's account of the same events . . . Luke 22.60-62

Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Just to add to the significance of what we've just read, and what Peter has just done, I think it helps to be aware of two additional details:

First, the disciples have just spent the last three or four *years* with Jesus. We don't know exactly how long it was, but that is scholars' best guess based on the gospel accounts.

So it's not like Peter just met Jesus at a weekend conference on the Kingdom of God, and they grabbed coffee during one of the breaks. They have just spent the equivalent of four years of college together.

"I don't know the man"?

But on top of that, the relationship between a rabbi and his followers in ancient Israel was unique. We really don't have a comparable relationship in US culture today. When you were a disciple, you lived together with your rabbi, ate meals together, spent free time together. Wherever the rabbi went you went. Whatever the rabbi did you did.

This would be like Spencer or Adeline or Lauren or Drake or Nico or Bronwyn signing up for a four year degree at Purdue where you had one professor for all four years, and you moved into his house, and ate all three meals at his table, and spent most of every day with him.

"I don't *know* the man"!?

Can you imagine what Jesus felt in that moment of betrayal? Can you imagine the hurt Peter would have seen in his eyes?

And can you imagine what Peter felt in that moment?

Luke says Peter went out and wept bitterly. It means a deep and wrenching outpouring of emotion. "What have I done?!"

The text doesn't spell out exactly what he's feeling, and I'm sure he's feeling a swirl of many things – guilt, shame, embarrassment, disappointment with himself, wishing he could go back and change what he did – but I suspect that amid all the other feelings these are the two main emotions:

remorse – he has utterly failed the one he loves most, and he feels the deep sting of that failure, and

grief – because of his failure, because he was thinking more about himself than Jesus, something has been shattered in his relationship with Jesus, the relationship has been severed, and he feels the deep pain of that loss

Every one of us has deep regrets. It is part of our human experience as fallen human beings. We all fail. We all do wrong. And when we stop to reflect on our failure from a biblical perspective we realize that there are always two people who are hurt by our wrongdoing;

We wrong another by.

- dishonoring or dismissing them
- speaking harsh and cutting words in hurt or anger,
- judging and tearing the other person down in the eyes of others through gossip or slander,
- acts of unkindness, dishonesty, deception, or betrayal,
 - all leading to a painful break and separation in the relationship

But in wronging others we have also hurt the God who created us – who created us to know him and love him and live our lives for him.

David, after his sin with Bathsheba, says to the Lord in Psalm 51, "Lord, I have sinned against you!" Our wronging others wrongs God as well, and separates us from him.

The Bible talks a lot about sin. At first glance it seems like sin is just about breaking rules. God made a long list of things we shouldn't do, and when we do them, that's sin.

But a more careful reading of the Bible shows that there are really two different things that are meant by sin.

What you could call capital-S Sin is when we rebel against the God who created us. God created us to live our lives with and for him. But we ignore the relationship he wants to have with us, we push him off the throne and we take his place as King in our lives. And then all of the other sins, what you could call the small-s sins, are the outworking of that central act of defiance, of mutiny. All other wrong doing comes as a result of that act of rebellion..

And that's what happens here. In this threefold act of denial, Peter has put himself first. He has thought about himself instead of Jesus, and has wronged his dear friend and King, and they are now separated by his sin.

And seeing his failure from a human perspective instead of from God's perspective, Peter despairs. He is convinced his failure will have the last word. This severing of relationship is permanent.

As we've been reminded all through this week, there was a time not long before these events during the last week of Jesus' life when Peter thought he knew better than Jesus did, and Jesus looked Peter in the eye and,

Matthew 16.23

Jesus said to Peter, "You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."

This week we've seen how that led Peter to try to tell the King how he should and should not be doing things, and how it led him to try to take things into his own hands when things were not going the way he thought they should go.

Now we see Peter succumbing again to a human perspective.

This time succumbing to despair because of his failure, believing that his failure is fatal to his relationship with Jesus, that his denial of Jesus is determinative of the future, and necessarily breaks something permanently between Jesus and him. Convinced of that, he turns and runs.

But then look what happens . . . two days later, after Peter's betrayal and the trial and death and entombment of Jesus, we are told that something unbelievable has happened. And it has a very personal bearing on one former fisherman named Peter.

As we've remembered this morning, Mary Magdalene and some of the other women go out early in the morning to finish anointing the body of Jesus. But when they get there, they discover the stone over the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away. The seal on the tomb has been broken. The body is gone. And there where it had been laid sits a heavenly messenger.

According to Mark 16.6-7, the messenger says

“Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body.

I love this. Listen to how particular this is message is:

Now go and tell his disciples, *including Peter*, that Jesus is going ahead of you *to Galilee*. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died.”

Mary goes and tells Peter and the other disciples what happened. Peter and John run to the tomb and find it empty.

Then they are together with the other disciples that night and Jesus himself, risen from the dead, comes and stands in their midst, and blesses them and empowers them with the Spirit, and again a week later, he comes and stands among them.

Jesus was dead, and now he is alive!

* * *

It's incredible that it happened but . . . what does it mean? What does it mean for us today that the seal was broken, the stone was rolled back, and Jesus walked out of the tomb, alive, into this world?

That brings us to our passage for today, which tells about events that unfold not in the upper room in Jerusalem, but back where everything started, back up on the shores of the sea of Galilee. In fact, it happens right where Peter encountered Jesus the very first time three or four years before.

Do you remember that story? This is how it goes.

Luke 5.1-11

One day as Jesus was standing by the Sea of Galilee, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God.² He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken,¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Now fast forward to this other story, the story we find at the very end of John's gospel, one that takes place after Peter's denial and after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Picking up in John's gospel, chapter 21, starting in verse 4:

John 21.4-6

At dawn Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn't see who he was. He called out, "Fellows, have you caught any fish?" "No," they replied. Then he said, "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get some!" So they did, and they couldn't haul in the net because there were so many fish in it.

One of the things we already know about Jesus is there is nothing random about anything he ever does. That's certainly true about what is unfolding now.

Jesus, as it happens, is standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Peter, as it happens, is out in a fishing boat.

Peter and his fishing friends, as it happens, have failed to catch anything.

Jesus happens to tell them to try again. They do what he says, and, as it happens, they bring in a great haul of fish.

Does any of that sound familiar? Do you think any of that would have seemed familiar to Peter?

I'm thinking he's thinking there shore is something fishy about all this, especially when you consider the net results. Sorry – maybe I should scale back on the fish humor, or just finish with it all together. But I'm afraid I'm too deep into it. When it comes to puns, there's always a catch, right? Okay, moving on ...

John 21.7

Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (for he had stripped for work), jumped into the water, and headed to shore.

I love this painting that shows Peter launching himself toward Jesus.



It's a fresco painted on the walls of the Church of the Holy Apostles, in Capernaum, right near where this event happened on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

John 21.8-11

The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore, for they were only about a hundred yards from shore. When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread. "Bring some of the fish you've just caught," Jesus said. So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn't torn.

Let me just pause here, at a place where it seems like every New Testament scholar has stopped for the past two thousand years. Why 153 fish? What is the significance of 153?

There have been all kinds of explanations offered for this particular detail, but most of them are pretty ridiculous: it's the number value of a Hebrew word in a prophecy from Ezekiel, or it's what's called a triangular number, which suggests the trinity, made from adding one plus two plus three all the way up to seventeen. But Scripture doesn't work in secret messages. It is usually just pretty straightforward.

I think the best explanation is that John, who was a fisherman, and who was there when this happened, and who was the author of this account, is just recording a factual bit of information.

Think about it. The first thing fishermen do when they bring in a catch is to go through the nets and toss the stuff they don't want to keep and then count the fish that are left so they can divide them evenly among themselves. I think during the conversation between Jesus and Peter that we're about to read about, John and the other disciples had some time on their hands, so while Jesus and Peter talk, the others, with nothing else to do, count out the catch.

John 21.12-14

"Now come and have some breakfast!" Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead.

Again, it just so happens that the fire on the shoreline over which Jesus has cooked their breakfast is a charcoal fire, and it just so happens that the only other time we hear about a charcoal fire in the gospels is just two chapters back when we find Peter warming himself by a charcoal fire in the courts of the High Priest.

Again, Jesus never does anything random.

John 21.15

After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

When he says "more than these," I think Jesus is referring back to the time a few nights before when Jesus tells the disciples that they will all fall away on account of him, and Peter says, "Even if all the others fall away on account of you, I never will" (Matthew 26.33). He is giving Peter the gift of bringing his pride and presumption out into the light.

"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you."

“Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him.

In his first encounter with Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus called him to a life of ministry using the metaphor of fishing. He will make Peter a fisherman of people, reaching others for Christ. Now he reinstates Peter, inviting him again to spend his life in his service, but this time he shifts and widens the metaphor, and invites Peter to be a shepherd of his sheep. Now his calling is both to reach those who are not followers of Christ and replenish those who are.

I think this shift in metaphor ties in to what Jesus says to Peter during the last supper, in Luke 22.32, when, telling Peter he will soon disown Jesus, he says:

I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

So Jesus asks and Peter answers. And then, unexpectedly, . . .

John 21.16

Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.”

“Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said.

Some people point out that in Greek the word Jesus uses here for love is a different one than the first time he asks the question, and they assign meaning to that. But there are lots of examples in John's gospel of John using different words interchangeably for the same idea for literary reasons, and in fact John uses both of these same verbs to describe the love the Father has for his son. So I think it's best to see these words as expressing the same idea in different words, rather than different ideas.

So Peter has now had a chance to reassure Jesus that in fact he does love him. But then, unexpectedly, . . .

John 21.17

A third time he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep.”

It just so happens that Peter's denial took place in three parts, and it just so happens that the conversation he is now having with Jesus is also taking place in three parts. Again, nothing random with Jesus.

And now Peter gets it. When it says, "Peter was hurt," the word here is similar to the word used a few chapters earlier when, after denying Jesus, he is overcome by remorse and grief. Like that earlier word, it means a painful feeling of grief or sadness.

The second time Peter heard the question, he was probably confused. Maybe Jesus didn't believe him the first time. Or maybe he is trying to test him.

But now, the third time he hears the question, he understands. He sees what Jesus is doing. He is giving Peter the chance to reaffirm his love for Jesus.

Peter acknowledges that, of course, as Lord, Jesus knows everything about him. He knows Peter better than Peter knows himself. And he knows, in spite of Peter's denial, that he really does love Jesus. Peter doesn't need to convince Jesus. Jesus is just giving Peter a chance to say it again. And again. And again. With each confession erasing a denial, and reaffirming his love, and receiving the love and forgiveness of Jesus all over again.

Jesus is not shoving his sin and failure in his face. He isn't pulling back from Peter and pushing him away. That is how we think when we see our failure from a human perspective. It is fatal. It is final. It has the last word.

But that's not what's true from God's point of view. In God's economy, precisely because of the death by which Jesus offered up his life as a sacrifice for sin just a few days before, the only time failure is fatal is if we refuse to receive the forgiveness that God extends to us through his Son..

No, Jesus is bringing Peter's sin and failure into the light precisely so Peter can see that the Lord's grace and not Peter's failure has the last word.

The Sea of Galilee, Jesus on the shoreline, the fishing boats, the empty nets, the miraculous catch, the charcoal fire, the three-fold repetition of Peter's love for Jesus, the three-fold reinstatement to service – Jesus is starting over with Peter. Because of his forgiveness, it is as though the denial never happened.

And as the story comes to an end, the very last words that Jesus speaks to Peter in the last gospel are identical with the very first words Jesus speaks to Peter in the first gospel (Matthew 4.19).

John 21.19

Then Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me!"

The same words the Risen Lord Jesus says to each of us all over again with each new day, and with each new failure..

* * *

What does it mean that Jesus rose from the dead?

It means that a fresh start is available to us every single day.

When we say yes to his invitation to follow him, then

When we fail him, He receives us.

When we deny him, He reinstates us.

When we disobey him, He reestablishes us in his love.

Because the cross was fatal to Jesus, our failure is not fatal to in our relationship with him. Because the seal was broken, and Jesus stepped out of the tomb, we can follow him from the death of failure into new life and new hope.

Every day we can leap out of the boat and swim towards him as he waits for us with open arms. Into a fresh start. Into a new beginning. Into mercies made new every morning.

And Peter got it. The third time through, it penetrated his heart. He shifted his perspective and began to see that sin is the thing that is *forgiven*, not the thing that is *fatal*, that sin isn't the thing that has the last word, but grace does.

So a few weeks later, we find Peter back in Jerusalem, a forgiven man, telling the crowds that they can experience a fresh start just as he has.

Acts 2.32-39

Peter said, "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. God made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and King."

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Peter replied, "Turn to God and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Jesus, our Lord, who died to save us, Jesus, our glorious king who lives again, invites us to come to him.

From wherever we are, and whatever we have done – to respond to his call and follow him for the first time, and all over again with each new day.

He stands on the shore and beckons, spreading his arms wide in warm welcome of all who leap over the side of the boat and swim to him. Receive him, even as he welcomes and receives you.

What does it mean that Jesus rose from the dead? Nothing less than that we can be in unbroken relationship with the Risen Lord, given a fresh start every time we fail, from now to eternity. Praise God! Alleluia! Christ the Lord is risen today, and his redeeming work is done!