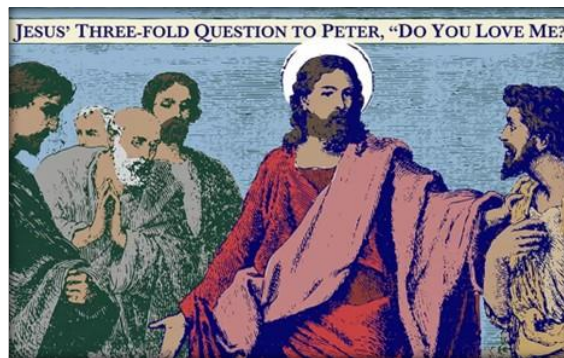


“Do You Love Me?”

John 21:1-19

From denial to new life

We continue our series on Peter. Last week, we read of his devastating three-fold denial of Jesus while Jesus was just inside, being tried before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. Today, we turn to Jesus reaching out to Peter, pouring out the grace of God yet not denying the truth of Peter’s betrayal.



Breakfast in Galilee

What must the disciples have been thinking in those first weeks after Jesus’ resurrection, as they headed up to Galilee to tend to their affairs, to resume something of their former lives. Was Jesus resuscitated like Lazarus, and thus, would return to his old life, grow old, and then die a second time? No, Jesus is going to return to the Father; he told Mary Magdalene exactly that. Whatever that means, it surely isn’t just going back to things as they were.

Ok, then, is he a ghost, a spirit of some kind? No, the Greeks had a word for that, *phantasma*, and it is never used in regard to the resurrected Jesus. Sure, the disciples had thought they were seeing a ghost, a *phantasma*, when they saw Jesus walking across the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:26), but they were wrong. He wasn’t a ghost then, and he isn’t a ghost now that he has been resurrected (see Luke 24).

One morning in the weeks after Jesus’ resurrection, Peter and some of the others head out for some morning fishing. After a while, they hear someone calling to them from the shore, telling them to try dropping their net on the right side of the boat. Figuring they have nothing to lose, they do so. At that moment, Peter realizes that Jesus is the man on the shore, so he put his clothes on (fishermen often fished naked if the weather was good), dove into the water and swam to shore. Meanwhile, the others pulled the net into the boat. It was teeming with fish, 153¹ in all, a miraculous catch by any measure.

When Peter gets to shore, Jesus is waiting. He is no ghost. He is no spirit. He has flesh and bones (Luke 24:39). He is a resurrected Jesus, but Jesus just the same.

And as he always had, Jesus still provides for their needs. Yes, Jesus enables them to get a big haul of fish, but when they come ashore they find that Jesus doesn’t need their fish, he has already has some fish cooking over an open fire.

And they all sit down to share this meal together. Though John doesn’t tell us explicitly that Jesus ate fish, we know from Luke’s account that Jesus ate fish in front of the disciples on the first night he came to them after his resurrection. He ate the fish that night to help them see that he was still flesh and bone (Luke 24:36-43). Perhaps not exactly the same sort of flesh and bone, but still “flesh and bone,” walking, talking, touching, and eating.

I’d bet that Jesus shared the meal with his disciples that morning. He had shared all their previous meals. You might wonder whether Jesus needs to eat to sustain his resurrected body, as you and I eat to sustain ours. Beats me. Perhaps Jesus eats now, not to sustain himself or because he needs to, but because he wants to enjoy the full bounty of God’s goodness, including God’s creation. (I take this as evidence that in the *fullness* of the Kingdom of God, I’ll be able to enjoy all the food I like without gaining weight—at least I’d like to think that!)

¹ Much ink has been spilled over the centuries offering various explanations for the “153.” Some think it must have some numerological meaning. For me, John says “153” because that is how many fish were caught in the net and John was there to see it. There is no real point in trying to read more into it. It is a miraculous catch. Enough said.

We picture the scene with our mind's eye, the bread and fish being passed around the fire, one disciple to another. We can't help but remember the time when Jesus fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes. Now, he feeds only a few. There is nothing miraculous or even remarkable about this meal, except for the fact that it was prepared by one who lay dead only a few weeks before.

Peter

Three times Peter denied Jesus in the early morning hours before the crucifixion. First to a servant girl. Then to a small group huddled around a fire. Then to a servant of the high priest. "Aren't you one of this man's disciples," they asked him. "No, I am not," he replied. His denials are understandable; he is scared, as simple as that. But how those three moments must have haunted him in the days afterward. To deny Jesus, the one you had come to know as Messiah and Lord. Just try to imagine yourself as Peter. Would the despair not have been overwhelming?

And then the resurrection. Jesus lives! Alleluia! But the memory of Peter's denial lives too. Perhaps nothing had been said between the two of them until the breakfast John describes. But now, as they finish their meal on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus turns to Peter and asks him, "Do you love me?" Not once, not twice, but three times. Peter gets it. He must. Three times, "Do you love me?" Each time, Peter replies, "Lord, you know that I love you." Does Jesus know this to be true? Does Peter mean it, truly now, for better and for worse?

Each of Peter's professions of love is met by Jesus with a similar command: "Feed my lambs . . . take care of my sheep . . . feed my sheep." Professing love is one thing; doing love is another. True love is grounded in doing, not saying. Thus, Peter is pledging not merely his love, he is pledging his life to Jesus. It is the life of "serving one another humbly in love," to use a phrase from Paul (Gal. 5:13), that will be the evidence of Peter's love of Jesus.

The story is a call to Peter to love and feed the followers of Jesus. Its threefold repetition recalls Peter's threefold denial. Nearly every reader has seen the story as a combination of a rehabilitation of Peter and an installment of Peter as leader of the community. The story builds upon classic Johannine notions of love wherein the followers of Jesus love Jesus by loving one another.

In recent years some readers have suggested that the change in the Greek terms for the words for "love" (from "friendship love" to "agape love") and for "sheep" (from a term that refers only to sheep to one that refers to cattle in general) indicates a subtle intensification of the exchange. This certainly could be true. However, the Gospel of John and early Christianity used the two words for love interchangeably. The shift in terminology is probably stylistic and signals nothing theologically. Also puzzling is the peculiar phrasing of Jesus' first question to Peter: "do you love me more than these?" The comparison may function as an intensive, not as an attempt to rank love.

Perhaps even more curious is Jesus' prediction about the future of Peter, wherein someone will tie a belt about him and lead him where he does not want to go. While it is not clear whether it is Jesus or Roman persecutors who are leading Peter, the saying points to a violent death. Jesus first calls Peter to love and care for his followers and then predicts his violent end. Love, it seems, offers no security.²

Truth

As a civilization, we seem to be losing our grip on the knowledge that there is such a thing as truth. The gospel writers want us to grasp and trust the truth of the Good News, not merely "true for you" or "true for me" but truly true, conforming to genuine reality. They offer us what they proclaim to be the true truth about Jesus.

² Lewis R. Donelson, "Exegetical Perspective on John 21:1–19," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 425.

One piece of this true truth that the apostles proclaim seems particularly odd and strange to us. Yet, there it is in the most basic and oldest of all the Christian creeds: we believe in the “the resurrection of the body.” This is not about Jesus’ resurrection, which we affirmed earlier in the Apostles Creed, it is about our own bodies. As Jesus was raised so shall we all be raised. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Rom. 8:11).

The Jews of Jesus’ day believed that when the Last Days arrived, all the dead would be resurrected. Paul is agreeing with that. Jesus is the first and the rest of us will follow; there just happens to be 2,000 years, so far, between the first person to be resurrected, Jesus, and the rest of the us. To use Paul’s agricultural metaphor of Jesus as the “first fruits,” God’s harvest is underway, it just seems to be taking a long time, by our measure of time at least.

If this all seems just a bit too fantastical and even weird to you, consider our affirmation of Jesus’ resurrection. That doesn’t seem so fantastical only because we’ve gotten used to the idea. But once you’ve accepted as true the claim that Jesus was resurrected and walked out of the tomb after having died . . . well, then everything is on the table. Being a Christian actually takes a big imagination, a mind and heart that refuses to try and shrink God and his creation into a small box that seems “reasonable” to us.

Our belief in the resurrection of the body is the promise that I will one day again see my dad and my grandparents – solid, material, tactile, real. What sort of bodies will we have? Most of the questions I have the Bible doesn’t answer. Will my dad have hair? Will I? Beats me. Paul can’t answer such questions and considers them even a bit beside the point. In 1 Corinthians 15:35-58, he lays out what he does know about our resurrection bodies.

What I do know to be true truth, is that what is true of Jesus’ resurrection will be true of us all, my dad, my grandparents and of me. So, at least I know the answer to the most important question: I will see my them again, I will know my grandfather, and I will hug him. We will talk and we will laugh and we will live basking in the love of God and the light of Christ. Perhaps, we will even talk some baseball. That is good news indeed.

How important is it that we believe in not only Jesus’ resurrection, but our own?

In his Interpretation series commentary on 1 Corinthians 15, Richard Hays reflects on the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead, i.e., that not only has Jesus been resurrected, but that we too shall be resurrected just as Jesus was.

All Christian proclamation must be grounded in the resurrection. The faith stands or falls with this, as Paul insists throughout the chapter [1 Corinthians 15]. This has several crucial implications.

First, it means above all else that the gospel is a word of radical grace, for resurrection is one thing that we can neither produce nor control nor manipulate: our hope is exclusively in God’s hands.

Second, it means that the faith is based on a particular event in human history, to which a definite circle of people gave testimony; the resurrection is not simply a symbol for the flowers coming up every spring or for the hope that springs eternal in the human heart. The Christian faith is grounded in the rising from the grave of Jesus Christ, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

Third, the foundational character of the resurrection means that eschatology is at the heart of the gospel. Because Christ is the first fruits, his resurrection points to the resurrection of all those who belong to him. That remains inescapably a future event. Thus, the effect of the resurrection of Christ is to turn our eyes to God’s coming future.

Fourth, if we deny the resurrection, we will find ourselves turning inward and focusing on our own religious experience as the matter of central interest. That is what some of the Corinthians were doing, and it has also been the besetting temptation of Protestant theology since Schleiermacher. This inward turn can take the form of pietistic religion interested only in soul saving, or it can take the form of “New Age” religion interested only in cultivating personal “spirituality.” Either way it comes to much the same thing. The gospel of the resurrection of the dead, by contrast, forces us to take seriously that God is committed to the creation and that God has acted and will act in ways beyond our experience and external to our subjectivity.