

The Gospel of John is a strange book. It is the latest of the New Testament Gospels and has the least in common with the other three. It's a bit more poetic and philosophical than the other Gospels. Oh, and it has two endings. The first ending involves resurrection appearances to Thomas and some other unnamed disciples with a relatively solid conclusion at the end of chapter 20. Jesus commissions them with the power of his own breath, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit."

And then chapter 21, this morning's reading, is thought to be a later addition to the text. And it's this other resurrection appearance that involves Simon Peter, the friend who denied and betrayed Jesus on Good Friday. Conjecture about the addition of the 21st chapter often centers around addressing rumors that Jesus was not fully human, rumors that had grown popular after the resurrection. Like the story of Jesus showing his wounds to Thomas, this story shows the humanity of Christ, depicted barefoot on the beach, frying up breakfast.

This story also addresses the problem of Peter, the friend who abandoned Jesus, but became the rock upon which the church was built. When we last met Peter, before the death of Jesus, he was running away from his teacher, denying that he had any relationship with him, and we're left with a confusing cliff hanger. What happens next between these two men, who had once been such close friends? In the 21st chapter of John we get the rest of the story.

In this final story in the last of the four canonical gospels, Jesus shows us what it means to be the embodiment of love in the world. What grace and forgiveness truly mean. What the gospel, the good news, really is. And Jesus directs us as to how we are to live in relationship with one another, not through an eloquent sermon, or an amazing miracle, but in the simple act of lighting a fire and cooking breakfast. It's a clear statement about who the risen Christ is. And where the risen Christ meets us, at the breakfast table. In the most ordinary, basic spaces of human life and work.

I have a tendency to make the same mistakes over and over again. Anyone know what I mean? I pick the same fights with my spouse that I've been picking with her for the last 14 years, and I fall right back into that people-pleasing roll all too easily, I refuse to ask for help and then get resentful when I've exhausted myself, I isolate when I'm anxious rather than seeking the support of others, and I choose the same distractions rather than attending to my soul. Does any of that sound familiar? Anyone else have stories like that?

Now I know what you're thinking, you're thinking sure – but you don't know how badly I mess up. You don't know how ugly and shameful and particular my story is. And that's true, maybe I don't. But that shame feeling, it's universal. And failing, that's universal too. And guess what, we've proven this morning that making the same mistake over and over again, we all do it. It's pretty normal.

Simon Peter lied. You might even call it compulsively. Offered the opportunity to tell the truth three different times, he never quite rises to the occasion. Rather than stand up for the one he claimed to love, he abandoned his friend into the hands of death. How must Peter have been feeling 2 weeks out from the crucifixion?

Jesus is gone. One of their own had betrayed him: handed him over to the enemy with a kiss. Peter had sworn he had no knowledge of the Galilean, and certainly no allegiance to him. The disciples had grown disenchanted by the humiliating reversal of their plans to overthrow their political enemies, such that John bothered to witness the crucifixion. If we leave the story with the appearance of Jesus to Thomas and the other disciples, we leave the disciples in a locked room, afraid to venture outside for fear of the authorities. But Jesus does not stay in that room, and it grows stale. It's not clear what the disciples are to do. They're confused, and they're caught in limbo, waiting for what's next, growing impatient with the inaction. So they go back to the life they once knew. Peter plans a late-night fishing trip, and seven of the eleven show up.

The career fishermen fail to catch anything all night long. So their impatience and confusion is intensified with disappointment. Failure in fishing brings back the failed mission felt on that Friday night. And just when it seems all is lost and the book is closed, there's one more chapter tacked on.

Once, I was brave enough to tell the truth about something that I carried so much shame over. I thought it was going to be a deal breaker. I worried that revealing the truth about myself would mean being rejected. And you know what happened? The next morning the sun came up, and there was coffee. And somehow life went on. And for Peter too, there was the rest of the story.

Jesus shows up and sets the breakfast table. And in perfect literary parallel to the trio of denials Jesus asks three times if Peter loves him and this time Peter tells the truth, Peter answers "yes".

Restoration is the rest of the story. In this moment on the beach Peter and Jesus' relationship is restored. You and I are restored to ourselves and to God in the same way. First, Jesus is always on the shoreline. The breakfast table is always set. Sometimes it takes time to make out that it's Jesus in the distance. Not crashing down from heaven but just waiting, tending the fire. Keeping the fish warm.

But even this isn't the end of the story. Answering "yes" to loving Jesus isn't enough. In response Jesus asks Peter to care for his sheep three times. It's a directive to engage in meaningful work. To participate in restoration. This exchange narrates the two things that social scientists have named the happiness indicators. Research shows that across lines of gender, race, culture, social and economic status the determinates of happiness are a sense of

belonging and a sense of purpose. Jesus restores both to Peter. A sense of belonging – the table is set. You are meant to be here.

A sense of purpose – look after my sheep. Do the work of love and justice in the world. Jesus is instructing Peter, and all of the disciples, to get out there in the world and care for others. But – hang on a minute – is Jesus mixing his metaphors? He’s just helped Peter and the others haul in a major catch of fish (intentionally numbered at 153, possibly the number of card carrying Jesus followers at the time) and he had instructed them previously (in very similar episode) to fish for people. So why the switch from catching fish to tending sheep?

If you’re a fisherman your relationship to the fish is simple – you catch them, you pull them up, you eat them up – the fish are afraid of the fisherman. And Jesus has shown just how easy fishing can be if you allow God to guide you. But a shepherd – sheep wouldn’t make it without a shepherd, a shepherd meets their needs, feeds them, protects them, heals their wounds, instructs the sheep in which way to go. It’s a much more involved connection.

At the beginning of their relationship Jesus instructs Peter to be a fisherman, but now, at the end of their time together, Jesus asks him to do something entirely new. Rather than simply add numbers to the count of fish in the boat, he’s called to care for those who need it, wherever they may be. “Look Peter,” Jesus says, “It’s not going to come naturally to you, it’s not going to be easy, but I’m so convinced you love me that I want you to feed my sheep.”

As Old South Church approaches our 350th Anniversary we’ve taken seriously the task of being honest with God about the ways in which we have fallen short, as individuals, as a society, as a church. And still, the sun rose this morning, and there is coffee (in the other room). Still the table is set. And we are welcome. Grace and forgiveness are real. And we are restored. And in that restoration we are granted both a sense of belonging (to God and to one another), and a sense of purpose. We who have been fed, are transformed, and called to feed others, to care for others, to set the table of grace. It won’t be easy, but Jesus gives us a new chance each day, to respond to his question “do you love me?” with a resounding “yes!”