

Witnesses of Easter

“Peter”

[John 21:15-17](#)

This season of Easter, we are looking at three Easter witnesses found in the Gospel of John. We have already examined the stories of Mary Magdalene and the doubting, but honest Thomas. Today, we come to our last witness, Simon Peter, the chief disciple of Jesus Christ.

Our scripture reading is part of a series of stories in which the risen Lord appears to his disciples. Jesus has already appeared to them twice before when they were still hiding in fear behind locked doors. This time, we find the disciples, precisely 7 of them, including Peter, back out in the world. Perhaps in search of some normalcy, Peter declares that he is going out fishing.

The other disciples decide to join him, and although they fished all night, they come up empty handed. Early in the morning, Jesus, appears to the disciples as an unrecognized figure who is standing by the shoreline. He calls out to them and suggests that they throw their net to the right side of the boat. You can probably imagine a skilled fisherman like Peter having to bite his tongue at this stranger telling him what to do like some novice. But the disciples cast their net to the right of the boat as the man suggested, and lo and behold, the net is so full of fish that they cannot even haul it back in. It is at that moment that they finally recognize Jesus.

When the disciples arrive on shore, they find that Jesus has prepared them breakfast, bread and fish, which is cooking over a charcoal fire. He instructs them to bring over some of the fish that they have caught and to sit and have breakfast. Today’s scripture reading is the conversation that takes place between Jesus and Peter after they had finished breakfast. Before we dive into the meaning behind the somewhat puzzling conversation, let’s briefly go over what the Bible has to say about Peter.

As you know, Peter is one of the most prominent characters featured in the Gospels. He is the most mentioned name besides Jesus. His original name was Simon, which was common name in Palestine during his lifetime. With his brother, Andrew, Peter may have originally been a follower of John the Baptist. When Andrew introduced his brother to Jesus, the new Rabbi in town gave Simon a new name, Cephas, which is an Aramaic word meaning “rock.” As the Greek word for rock is “petros,” or Peter as it is in English, became his new name.

Before he became Jesus’ disciple, Peter was a fisherman on the coast of the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps, fishing was a family business that he and his brother Andrew ran. Their business partners were Zebedee and their sons, James and John, who also became Jesus’ disciples later. When Jesus called him to follow, Peter literally dropped what he was doing and followed him.

Once he was called by Jesus, Peter quickly became his chief disciple with his aggressive personality and fearless loyalty. He was the de facto spokesperson for the whole group. When Jesus asked his disciples, “But, who do you say that I am?,” it was Peter who emphatically answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of

the living God.” Peter was clearly one of Jesus’ favorites. Along with James and John, Jesus included Peter in his inner circle. Only those three were present for some of the most memorable moments of Jesus’ ministry, like when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus, when he was transfigured on the mountain, and when he prayed in agony before his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane.

However, Peter was far from being perfect. He had his own flaws. He often got himself into trouble and embarrassment because, being impatient and impulsive, he spoke and acted too soon.

For instance, it was Peter who when he saw Jesus walking on water, jumped into the water, only to become afraid and begin to sink. When Jesus talked about his own death, it was Peter who took Jesus aside and rebuked him, only to be scolded by him and even called Satan! When they witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration, it was Peter who suggested building dwelling places for Jesus as well as for Moses and Elijah, the two prophets who appeared, only to fall to the ground in fear when he heard a voice, coming from the cloud. And when people came to arrest Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, it was Peter who drew his sword and attacked them, cutting the ear of the high priest’s servant only to be told by Jesus to put down his weapon.

But perhaps Peter’s most widely known failure is his denial of Jesus, which is an even that is recorded in all 4 Gospels. When Jesus told his disciples that they all would falter in their faithfulness to him and become scattered, Peter proudly declared, “Even if everyone stumbles, I won’t.” And when Jesus said to Peter, “I assure you that on this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times,” Peter insisted, “Even if I must die alongside you, I won’t deny you.”

And we know what happened that very night. To his credit, when Jesus was arrested and taken to the high priest it was Peter who followed at a distance even as the other disciples deserted Jesus. During Jesus’ trial, as Peter sat with the guards and tried to warm himself at the fire in the courtyard, one of the servant girls recognized him and said, “You were with Jesus.” Peter denied her, saying, “I don’t know or understand what you are talking about.” And, he moved away from the fire to avoid her.

After a while, someone else recognized him and said, “You are one of them.” Peter said, “Man, I am not!” Soon, some other people joined in, saying, “Surely, you were with him because you are from Galilee.” What did Peter do? He denied Jesus again, this time more emphatically by swearing and cursing. Immediately, the rooster crowed the second time. According to Luke’s gospel, at the very moment that the rooster crowed, Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter. Remembering what Jesus had said earlier, Peter went out and wept, crying uncontrollably.

Can you imagine his guilt and shame? Yes, the other disciples had fled, and Peter had stayed. But he alone had verbally denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times. I am sure he could not forgive himself for what he had done. We get a sense of the disgust he must have had for himself and the shame he carried when he did not come back for either Jesus’ crucifixion or his burial. That night, Peter’s trademark boldness and confidence died. He felt like a phony. A complete failure. And, so he ran away.

Later, he found himself back with the rest of the disciples, who had hid themselves in fear behind locked doors. Perhaps it symbolized Peter coming to terms with the fact that, for all of his bravado, he was no different than the rest of them. And we see that the rest of the disciples still looked up to him. We know that

they still viewed him as the leader of the group because they followed him when he said he was going back to his old occupation of fishing.

This is something we can all relate to, can't we? When things are uncertain in our lives, or we don't know what to do, we take refuge and comfort in things we know how to do. We go back to the core things that make up who we are, or think we are. And yet, we see that what used to bring fullness to Peter's life no longer does. His net comes back empty. He can't run from his guilt and shame in things that were once familiar.

Fortunately, this is not the end of Peter's story. As he did three years before, Jesus comes to Peter on the shore of the sea of Galilee. This time, it is with a gift of forgiveness and redemption. Notice that Jesus does not call him by Peter, his new name, but rather as Simon, son of John, which was his old name, the name he had before meeting Jesus.

Jesus asks Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" three times. Three times the question is asked, matching the number of times Peter denied him. Jesus offers Peter the chance to get it right, to become whole again. Each time he asks the question to Peter, it is as if Jesus is communicating to him, "I love you. No matter how you fall, I am here to pick you up, to raise you up again." And each time, in the presence of the resurrected Christ, Peter is able to find the strength to accept his redemption, "Yes, Lord," he replies, "You know I love you."

It is through an encounter with the living Christ that Peter's guilt and shame fades away. It is in Jesus Christ that Peter is born again as a man of relentless courage and determination. Each time Peter hears Jesus' words, "Feed my lambs" "Take care of my sheep" "Feed my sheep," his commitment to Jesus' ministry is renewed. It is no longer by Peter's false sense of bravado, false sense of pride, false sense of righteousness that he will go forth to serve God's people. And in this exchange, we notice that the name Jesus gave to him in their first encounter is also being restored. Immediately following this exchange between Jesus and Peter, the writer begins to call the disciple by his new name again.

In having personally experienced redemption and restoration in Jesus Christ, Peter is able to lead the early church in proclaiming the message of God's offer of love, mercy, and forgiveness first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. In the Book of Acts, we witness Peter, the same Peter who cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, call the Jews who had gathered outside the Temple his friends. For Peter knows that their betrayal is no worse than his own.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Peter's story is our story. We all are in need of forgiveness as we walk this journey of faith. We all have our moments of both fall and rise. May you know that what remains through the peaks and valleys is God's story of forgiveness, healing and redemption. And in knowing it as a personal testimony in your lives, may you go out into the world and share the love you have received so graciously with those in your midst. May you also commit to feeding and taking care of Jesus' sheep.

In closing, I would like to highlight an upcoming all-church service project. On April 29, which is the 5th Sunday of the month, we will worship in a special way that involves our hands and feet. Our worship service will begin in the sanctuary as usual. After about 20-30 minutes, we will, all together with our children

and youth, move to the Fellowship Hall and continue to worship there with our hands and feet, while packaging meals for the hungry through a non-profit organization, Rise Against Hunger. Our church has sponsored this event a few times in the past, so many of you know how meaningful our day of faith in action will be.

Through this special all-church service project, may we beautifully carry out Jesus' command to feed his sheep and so show our love for him!

Thanks be to God! Amen.