

SERMON EASTER 3 MAY 4, 2025

FIRST READING Acts 9:1-6
PSALM Psalm 30
SECOND READING Revelation 5:11-14
THE GOSPEL John 21:1-19

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A fishing trip becomes a divine encounter;
and a man intent on arresting others is arrested by the risen Christ.

Two stories, two critical encounters that prepare Peter and Paul for leadership in the early church:

Peter as leader of the first community in Jerusalem.

Paul as the apostle to carry the message of Jesus' way deep into the Gentile world, and in doing so to articulate a comprehensive understanding of this new faith.

Today, the whole world acknowledges and mourns the last of Peter's successors in the Roman Catholic tradition, Pope Francis.

And whenever people sing "Amazing grace ... that saved a wretch like me," they echo Paul, though they may not know it. And in other ways, Paul's thought has contributed to world we know today.

Their lives following these encounters could be summed up in the words from today's Psalm:

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up.

What a beautiful image to describe the experience of resurrection!

And what a debt the world owes to those two life-changing encounters, though it may not realise it!

This is the yeast that leavens the whole loaf, and we are privileged to have a part in this great, continuing story.

For the church is not a mass movement of mindless people under a totalitarian rule, but a coming together of people whose lives have been touched by the resurrection.

And the mission of God in the world is carried forward by such people, not so much by clever programmes of reform, but more by ordinary people living changed lives.

You and me.

So, let's follow Peter's meeting with Jesus to see what we may learn.

As we listened to the Passion in Holy Week, we heard again Peter three times denying any relationship with Jesus.

Perhaps we shook our heads: Oh Peter! What a sad fall from grace!

But the denials were not where he fell, only the consequence of an earlier failure.

When I was about eight or nine, I developed a habit of saying, "I know," whenever I thought someone was telling me something I already knew. Then one day it happened that an aunt was explaining something to me, and automatically I said, "Yes, I know." She stopped and said, "David, do you really know what I'm telling you?"

I didn't. And all these decades later, I haven't forgotten!

It was a bit like that with Peter. He thought he knew more than Jesus.

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."

That is where Peter fell, in his over-confidence in his own love and loyalty, his belief in his own courage and strength. He would be a champion for Jesus.

Jesus does not ask us to be heroes, but to be ourselves, to be real.

Now, after meeting the risen Jesus, this remained unfinished business for Peter, and he didn't know what to do about it.

So, when you have a problem you can't or won't solve, what do you do?

Find something else to take your mind off it.

"I'm going fishing," Peter says, and others join him. He does know how to catch fish. He loves the feel of a net heavy with a catch.

But all night they keep casting their net and hauling it in empty.

Then a stranger on the shore suggests they try the other side, and immediately the net is filled to overflowing.

Recognition dawns for one disciple: "It is the Lord!" says John.

But Peter is naked, as naked as Adam and Eve when they hid from God in the Garden of Eden. And maybe he feels abashed for a similar reason. Who wants their inner nakedness exposed?

Now, he hastily covers himself, plunges into the sea and wades ashore to meet his risen Lord.

Perhaps he intended to apologise to Jesus before the others arrived.

But he is silent. They all are.

Sometimes we need to be silent and wait.

Jesus has a fire going with bread and fish cooking on it. He invites a contribution from their incredible catch. Then they eat, in silence.

The last meal they had shared with Jesus was supper on the dark night of Jesus' arrest and trial. Now, as dawn breaks on a new day, Jesus again breaks bread with them – a before and after, the Last Supper and a First Break-fast.

And in the silence, perhaps they heard again the words he had spoken then: *This is my body given for you.*

It is this sacramental meal that prepares them for what is to follow.

“Peter, do you love me more than these?”

He doesn't say why did you deny me? but goes to the very beginning of Peter's fall, with this question echoing the intensity of Peter's earlier avowal.

He uses the strong word for love, *agapé*, self-giving, sacrificial love: “Do you *agapé* me more than these?”

But Peter can only use a milder word, *phileo*, friendship: “Yes, Lord, you know I am your friend.”

“Feed my lambs.”

Jesus asks a second question, still using the word *agapé*, but without the emphasis of the words “more than these.”

“Yes, Lord, you know I am your friend.”

“Tend my sheep.”

And now Jesus uses Peter's preferred word: “Peter, do you love me as a friend?”

This hurt, but Jesus had met him on his own limited ground and in effect was saying it is enough that you love me as a friend, I still have work for you to do: “Feed my sheep ...”

How sweetly and firmly Jesus applies life-saving judgement to Peter. He doesn't harangue or chastise him for running away but opens him to a better understanding of himself and of his relationship with Jesus.

Jesus accepts Peter as he is, a man with flaws, but now able to acknowledge his weaknesses.

He is now ready to be a shepherd to Jesus' flock.

Then there follows a warning, in effect a word to underline for Peter his mortality, his limited humanity. Jesus did not want him to be a hero, but a good friend growing in love for his Lord.

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and 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.

Peter's unfinished business has been resolved by the grace and truth of Jesus, and he is ready to start again.

Jesus now reiterates his first call: "Follow me."

"Follow me." That is all any of us need to hear.

That is what we need to heed.

And if we follow the risen Christ, the way will open before us. We shall discover more of the purposes of God for us.

And that, for all my stumbling and wandering, and the very little I know, and after all these years,

that I do know.

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up.