

MBC – 4/4/2021 – Easter Sunday – Pastor Doug Thompson
"Following the Risen Lord Jesus"
 John 21

This morning I want us to look at the very last chapter of John's Gospel – ch.21. Now I believe along with many Bible scholars that this chapter was actually added on, by John, sometime after he finished his Gospel with the end of ch.20—

- John 20:30–31 ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

He put down his quill and thought he was done, but the Holy Spirit had more to say, because he added this chapter to answer some questions that Christians had: What about Peter? He denied Jesus three times—were he and Jesus reconciled? And what about that rumor that Jesus said John would remain alive until He returned. Many Christians believed that as John was getting older, Christ's return was getting closer! John needed to deal with that.

- And finally, people must have asked John the same question that you and I ask as we read our Bibles: How did the authors decide what to put in and what to leave out? – so he answers that.

But the main thing I want us to see this morning is what the Disciples – especially Peter – had to learn: how to be a follower of the *risen* Lord Jesus Christ. How do you relate to someone who is God and man, and alive from the dead? And how do we do that 2,000 years later? I'm so glad the Spirit moved John to write this final chapter because it shows us how to follow the risen Lord Jesus.

(Pray)

I. Bear fruit by abiding (vv.1-14).

- John 21:1–14 ¹After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias (that's another name for the Sea of Galilee), and he revealed himself in this way. ²Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.
- ⁸The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. ⁹When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Two things stand out: **First**, Jesus was alive and in a real physical body. He wasn't some phantom. In Luke's Gospel Jesus says, "A spirit doesn't have flesh and bones like you see!"

This is important: this was the same Jesus, they knew – alive from the dead. It wasn't some hallucination produced by their wishful thinking. I remind you: they didn't expect this. He predicted His resurrection, repeatedly, but *still* they were shocked when it happened. Thomas was in such disbelief, that Jesus had to make a special appearance to convince him that it was really Him, in a glorified, physical body. So this explains why Jesus is on this beach making breakfast for His Disciples.

And the **second** thing that stands out here is that *Jesus is still caring for His Disciples*. Do you see this? After all the stress and heartbreak of what has just gone down, they might have wondered, "With Jesus gone who will care for us now?" Here is the answer: Jesus! He will care for His own—

- Yes, He's different, but it's the same Person they had walked and talked and eaten with before His crucifixion. And He is still in a human body like theirs. In Revelation, John reveals Jesus in heaven in stunning glory. But in this last chapter of His Gospel he wants to stress: He's the *same* Jesus! He loved them and cared for them before His death, and He will love and care for them after His resurrection. And beloved, this very *same* Jesus loves and cares for us now, from heaven. In your mind, close that 2,000 year gap, and imagine yourself on that same beach having breakfast with Him!

So in v.3 Peter says, "I am going fishing." Peter is their leader, so the others followed him. They were fishermen, they still had to make a living, so on the surface, you say, "no big deal."

But these are also all men who had seen their Jesus, alive from the dead – which validated all that He ever taught and predicted. Which means they had a lot to process mentally! So why is Peter, the Leader of the Twelve, going fishing?

- When Peter said, "I'm going fishing," I believe there was *resignation* in his voice. What he was really saying was, "I'm going *back* to fishing." Peter can't shake what happened before Jesus' crucifixion. It plays over and over in his mind like a bad dream: he denied His Lord Jesus--three times – and after bragging that even if all the other Disciples left Jesus, he never would. Three times – just to save his own skin. He would never forget hearing the rooster crow and seeing Jesus turn and look at him. And how he wept so bitterly.

It hurt before, but now that Jesus was risen, all of his mistakes and blunders came flooding back into his mind. Peter felt like such a failure that he decided to go back to what he knew best: fishing. He was saying, "I'm not so good at this discipleship gig. I don't seem to have what it takes. The only thing I do really well is to put my foot in my mouth. That, and fishing. At least I can do that."

- *And don't you and I do the same thing? When we get discouraged that we aren't making the mark as Jesus' followers – too many failures, not enough successes, repeating the same sins – we revert back to what we do well in our flesh. "If I'm failing as a Christian, at least I'm good at *something*." But did Jesus set that mark, or did we? Is He disappointed in us – or are we just disappointed in ourselves?

Now – this *very* same thing happened to Peter once before, and Jesus dealt with Peter the same way—

Turn to Luke 5:3 and you will see the parallel. This was near the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus had already called Peter and some of the others to follow Him, but Peter hadn't jumped in with both feet. He hadn't given up his fishing business—

- Luke 5:3–9 ³Getting into one of the boats (Jesus), which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." [Fishermen just *love* getting advice from carpenters, don't they?] ⁶And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ⁷They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." ⁹For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken.

Why did Peter react like that? He had seen Jesus do a mighty miracle, but he was *convicted* because he knew what a lukewarm disciple he was. He was disappointed in *himself*. But look at how Jesus responds to Peter (v.10)—

- Luke 5:10–11 And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men!" ¹¹And when they had brought their boats to land, *they left everything and followed him.*

Peter thought he was a useless failure, but Jesus said, "*Oh no, I can use a man like you!*"

- So Peter is having the very same struggle here in John 21, after the resurrection. He had failed Jesus miserably and he felt useless. I've struggled with that many times over my 49 years as a Christian: "How can Jesus use me when I am such a wretch? Why would He even want to use someone as flawed and failing as me? Lord, surely You can find someone else who can do a better job than me. I'm going back to rock and roll."

But Jesus is so personal, so loving, and so forgiving. Peter is fishing again. And once again the nets are empty – by divine design, right? Jesus moved all the fish to the other side of the boat to maximize their frustration! And then Jesus asked the question that every empty-handed fisherman dreads: "*Hey, didya catch anything?*" Grown men take off their fishing boots and creep into their homes, praying their wives won't ask this question!

- "Got any fish?" They answer with one syllable, through gritted teeth: "No."

Then carpenter-Jesus once again gave them some fishing advice: "*Throw the net on the other side. That's where the fish are!*" Now immediately, Peter has to be thinking: "Wait a minute. . . this sounds familiar. This is like *deja-vu* all over again." So they did as He said, and sure enough, Jesus was right. The net was so full that it was another miracle that it didn't break. Do you see that Jesus was sovereign over both: their empty nets and their full nets? He had a reason for the one, and a reason for the other – and that's true for you and me too, amen?

- So John says 153 fish. People have tried to read in some allegorical significance to this number, 153: the early church father Jerome said it represented the 153 different varieties of fish – uh, I think we've found a few more . . . it's been tied to mathematical equations . . . if you attach numbers to the Greek letters of Mary Magdalene's name and add them up they equal 153. The

truth is, John was a fisherman, and every fisherman can tell you exactly how many fish he has caught! Right? And the size of each one.

- I've told you my brother Tank has a ruler tattooed on his forearm so that he can measure every fish he catches.

Immediately, Peter recognized this as a miracle and remembered when it had happened before—

- ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved (John) therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.

Thoughtful John just says, "It's the Lord!" Peter jumps in and starts swimming! In chapter, 20, both Peter and John are racing to Jesus' tomb – when John gets there he stops and looks in. Peter charges right into the tomb – probably hit his head going in. Always impulsive. And always wanted to be where Jesus was.

- And you notice that when they got to shore, Jesus already had breakfast ready. How does Jesus make breakfast? "BREAKFAST!"

And not only did He invite them to join Him for breakfast, He even *served* them. And John says that no one asked the obvious, "Jesus, is it really you?" They knew. There was no doubt. He is loving them and serving them. They knew. But it was very quiet around that fire as all of them are going over in their minds what had just happened – especially Peter, who was still wondering how Jesus felt about him after what he had done.

So why did Jesus deliberately frustrate Peter and then fill his net to overflowing after he obeyed Him? What was Jesus trying to teach this discouraged disciple? It's just what He had taught His men in that upper room just a few days earlier. Listen to these words—

- John 15:4–5 ⁴Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

*Peter thought that he was a washed-up failure, and Jesus wanted Peter to know that he was right: he was pretty much a failure and really had no future. As a matter of fact, he couldn't even do the one thing that he *thought* he *could* do--fish--unless Jesus filled the net. He wanted to teach Peter that he could do nothing apart from Jesus – even what he thought he could do the best.*

- *How does Jesus teach His beloved disciples this lesson? How does He get it through our heads that apart from Him we can do nothing? *By allowing us to fail!* Not in something where we're not so hot anyway, but in that very thing in which we think we excel. For Peter, it was his fishing. Maybe it's your job, or some gift or talent you have. But it's something that you can do better than others, and without anyone else's help. It might even be preaching or teaching God's Word. And God will allow you to fall flat on your face—

It's happened to me plenty of times. 31 years ago, MBC sent an elder and his wife from the church to visit the church I was pastoring in S. Cal. I led worship and preached – like I still do – and afterwards we were at lunch, and this elder said, "In your application you said that preaching was one of your *strengths*?" He said it as a question – *after* hearing me preach! They hired me anyway.

- I remember many years ago, reading something that has carried me through times like that. A.W. Tozer said: *"It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply."*

Wow. Why is that? Because we won't abide in Christ until we are broken. Broken in our self-sufficiency. Broken right in the area where we think we can't be broken. When depression and discouragement hits, we all want to fall back on those things, don't we? Jesus Christ wants us to fall back on Him. So He has to show us the hard way, the painful way, that apart from Him, we can do nothing.

- Many times, people come to see me feeling depressed and discouraged. They feel like spiritual failures – wondering if they have sinned away God's grace. Just like Peter must have felt. And often I say, "God has you right where He wants you!" Why is that? Because that's when we hear Him say what he said to Paul—"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in your weakness."
- And how did Paul respond? "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

When we have lost all hope in our own sufficiency, we will be driven to Christ for His. And when we rest in Him – that's what it means to abide – it's then that we will bear much fruit. That's just what happened to Peter in Luke 5 and John 21. Jesus was teaching him the absolute necessity of abiding in Him. Resting in Him, trusting in Him instead of himself.

This is how we follow the risen Christ: recognize your own weakness and emptiness, come to Christ for His fullness and strength. Cling to Christ. Beloved, let your failures and sins drive you to abide in Him. Until you do: the fish will always be on the other side of the boat!

II. Show love by obeying. (vv.15-17)

"If you love Me, obey Me."

- John 21:15–17 ¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, (*Simon* was Peter's pre-disciple name. When Jesus used his former name it was because he was acting like his former self – kinda like when your mom would use your middle name: "Douglas Jay!") "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

Every person around that campfire knew that there was some unfinished business between Peter and Jesus. They all knew that Peter had publicly denied Jesus--three times. Denied that he even knew Jesus and called on God to curse him if he was lying. And now, he is supposed to be the leader of the disciples and have the keys to the kingdom? Peter had to know if Jesus could forgive him. Peter needed the other disciples to know if Jesus could forgive him. Can you imagine if Jesus had returned to heaven and didn't deal with this?

Now of course Jesus would forgive Peter. Peter is the one who asked Jesus—

- Matthew 18:21–22 “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” And what was Jesus’ answer? ²²Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” I.e., our forgiveness of others should be as limitless as God’s forgiveness of us! Jesus wouldn’t require a forgiveness of Peter that He wouldn’t also extend to Peter.

But this was about more than forgiveness. It was about restoration: Could Jesus still use Peter? Now I wonder if Peter remembered what Jesus had said to him right before He was arrested—

- Luke 22:31–32 ³¹“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

This was Jesus promising Peter that even though he would fall, he wouldn’t wipe out completely, and he would turn – he would return to being the leader of the Disciples. But Peter was so consumed with his own guilt. I don’t know if he grasped what Jesus had said.

So they’ve finished eating--and it must have been very quiet around the campfire--Jesus turns to Peter and asks: "Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?" You could have heard a pin drop. But what did Jesus mean? There are three possibilities—

- 1.) Do you love Me more than you love these other men?
- 2.) Do you love Me more than they love Me?
- 3.) Do you love Me more than “these things:” fishing – the nets, boats, and stuff.

All three are possible: Peter had bragged that he was more loyal to Jesus than the other Disciples. But because of what had just happened out on Galilee, I think Jesus was saying, "Peter do you love Me more than your fishing?" "Peter, now are you ready to leave it all, and follow Me?" Jesus is going back to heaven; does Peter love Jesus enough to leave it all, for good, and follow Him into uncharted territory? "Peter, do you love Me that much?"

- I think Peter answered Jesus quietly: "Yes Lord, *You know* that I love you." But he must have been thinking, "But after what I’ve done, how can I claim to love You?"

But look at Jesus' answer: "Feed My lambs." I.e., "You *say* you love Me? Prove it by your actions. Instead of fishing for yourself, shepherd *My* sheep."

- That’s the test of love, right? "*If you love Me, obey Me.*" Disciples prove their love by obedience to their Master. Jesus wasn't harsh with Peter. He was gracious. *He* knew Peter loved Him, and He wanted *Peter* to know – and words or emotions wouldn’t bring that assurance – only obedience would.

So Jesus asks him three times, "Do you love Me?" – to make up for his three denials. Isn’t that so kind of Jesus? He also wanted Peter to think about what he was saying: The first two times Jesus asks the question He uses the word *agape*’ which is the highest, most selfless form of love – but Peter responds with *phileo*, which is more casual, friendship, affection. Maybe he was too ashamed to say that he loved Jesus with *agape*’ love. But the third time Jesus used *Peter’s* word—

- John 21:17 ¹⁷He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you even have *phileo* love for Me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

All Peter can do is appeal to Jesus’ own knowledge of his heart: “Lord *You* know – You know that I love you.” Do you ever cry out to God like that? I do – often: “Father, in spite of all my sins, all I can cling to is that You know that I love You!”

- Spurgeon went to visit elderly woman from his congregation who was sick and housebound— and very sad. She said to him, “Pastor, I don’t think that my faith is real. I wonder if I have any love for Jesus at all.” He just listened. Then he took a piece of paper and a pencil, and he wrote on the paper, “I do not love Jesus Christ.” He handed it to her and asked her to sign it. She said, “Oh no, I couldn’t sign that.” Spurgeon said, “No, come along now, sign it.” She said, “Oh no, I couldn’t sign that. Jesus *knows* that isn’t true.”

Exactly. Our Lord knows our hearts. The way *we* will know our own hearts is to put our faith into action. In 2 Pet.1, Peter said that’s how you “make your calling and election sure” – put your faith to work. Obey your Master. That’s biblical assurance.

- And for the rest of his days, Peter served Jesus by loving and serving His people.

And then in v.18, Jesus tells Peter just what his love will cost him. Being a disciple means--

III. Serve Christ by following. (vv.18-23)

"You follow Me!"

- John 21:18–23 ¹⁸Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “*Follow me.*” ²⁰Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” (that would be John who is writing this) ²¹When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” ²²Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” ²³So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

Peter's love for Jesus would lead to martyrdom. Jesus was saying that Peter would be stretched out in crucifixion. Tradition says he was crucified upside-down because he felt unworthy to be crucified the same way that his Lord was. Look at v.19—

- *And after saying this, He said to him, "Follow Me!" (lit. "keep following Me!")*

And what’s the very next thing Peter does? He takes his eyes off of Jesus! That got him in trouble once when he was walking on water, you remember that? Once again, he *compares himself* to the other disciples—

- “Lord, what about John? I’m going to be crucified – what’s it going to cost John to follow You?”

What's Jesus' answer? "It's none of your business, Peter. You follow Me."

Wow. That's blunt! This is tough love. Jesus is *always* compassionate, but He doesn't *coddle* people. And He doesn't baby Peter here: "*Don't compare yourself with other disciples Peter.*"

What following Jesus looks like for me is not what following Jesus will look like for you. Jesus calls some of His followers to great suffering, doesn't He? Some suffer physically, mentally, emotionally. Others He blesses with great health and happiness. Don't compare. You don't know what Jesus has going with someone else. And if you can't compare, then you also can't judge. Paul said this—

- Romans 14:4 ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

That's another way of saying: "Don't worry about others – you follow Jesus!"

- Isn't that enough to keep you busy? I think so. But it's also *liberating*, because Jesus doesn't compare you with His other disciples either! Someone is smarter than you or has more energy than you? Jesus says, "*What is that to you? – you follow Me.*" I don't have to be discouraged at preachers who are more intelligent, or articulate than me, or they can preach without notes (!) – or they have more hair! Jesus says, "*What is that to you? You follow Me.*"

We each have our own race to run, and we each need to stay in our own lane, and not be looking around at the other runners. Jesus will give each of grace to do what He's given us to do until He calls us home.

In John's Gospel, these are the last words of Jesus: "You, follow Me." Short and sweet, right? How do you and I follow the risen Lord Jesus until He takes us home or returns?

Bear fruit by abiding in Him. Love Him by obeying Him. Serve Him by following Him.

Beloved, Jesus made it simple for us, didn't He? Not easy, but simple: we just keep our eyes on Him through many danger, toils, and snares – through all the persecutions, pandemics and politics – we just follow Jesus, all the way home.

* * * *

Well John ends by clearing up a misunderstanding: Some people thought that Jesus had said that John would live until His Second Coming, and he wanted to correct that. He didn't want folks preparing for the Rapture every time he caught a cold! And others asked why he left some things out—

- John 21:25 ²⁵Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

But at the end of ch.20, he said why he wrote what he did—

- John 20:31 ³¹but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.