

**"The Resurrection of Peter"**  
**John 21:1- 25**

You can tell Easter is over. The crowds are gone. The flowers are gone. The children have gone back to Sunday School.

I supposed it's time to get back to normal, whatever normal is. I see the fishing nets that have been laying on the ground for the past three years. I may as well gather them up, along with my partners, and go back doing what we do best – fishing. It's a tedious routine. You spend all night in the boat and in the morning you bring in an empty net. Same-o-same o, as they say. Even when a voice from the shore challenged us to cast our nets on the other side and try again. We heard that one before and it worked. We brought in so many fish the nets were beginning to tear.<sup>1</sup> If it worked before, why not do it again?

Wait a minute. That voice. It's the Lord. So I jumped into the sea and swam toward him as fast as I could. With water still blurring my vision, the only thing I could pick out was a charcoal fire burning on the beach. That made me uncomfortable. The last time I saw such a fire was in the courtyard of the high priest.<sup>2</sup> That's a scene from my life I'd prefer to forget.

Then Jesus asked me a question that cut to the quick: **"Peter, do you love me?"** I know that my response was uncharacteristically restrained, **"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."**

Maybe it's not the same-o-same-o after all. There was a time, not long ago, when my tongue was always running ahead of my mind. In the past, I would have answered that question in any number of ways:

**"Lord, I love you so much I'll step out of the boat on this stormy sea and walk to your side."**<sup>3</sup>

**"Lord, I love you so much that I'll do everything in my power to help you avoid this trip of suffering that you keep talking about."**<sup>4</sup>

**"Lord, I love you so much I wouldn't think of having you wash my feet."**<sup>5</sup>

**"Lord I love you so much I'm willing to die for you."**<sup>6</sup> **"Even if all the others run away, I'll stay by your side forever."**<sup>7</sup>

**"Lord I love you so much that I'll draw my sword and fight on your behalf."**<sup>8</sup>

Not this time. I simply say, **"Lord, you know that I love you."** Something is different, really different. The difference is Easter. It's not over after all. It couldn't be and still be Easter. Easter has to do with my resurrection as well as that of Jesus; with your coming to new life as well as myself.

I admit I felt hurt when Jesus asked me for the third time, "**Do you love me?**" I wasn't upset with Jesus, but with myself. It reminded me of how I denied Jesus and failed to be a faithful disciple. It was even more painful because of what I couldn't say in response. Only, "**Lord you know that I love you.**"

I need to interrupt Peter's reflections at this point and I apologize for the academic exercise that follows, but there are two different Greek words in this passage that are translated in English as *love*: *phileo*, which is the love among friends and family; and *agape*, which refers to the sacrificial kind of love God has for us, a love that knows no limit and no end. This is how the dialogue goes when you mix Greek with English:

**"Simon, son of John, do you *agapao* me more than these?" "Yes, Lord; you know that I *phileo* you."**

**"Simon, son of John, do you *agapao* me?" "Yes, Lord; you know that I *phileo* you."**

**"Simon, son of John, do you *phileo* me?" "Yes, Lord; you know that I *phileo* you."**

Peter was honest enough about himself not to use *agape* in reference to his love for God. Perhaps Jesus was frustrated enough by the third time that he used *phileo* instead of *agapao* as if to say, "Simon, son of John, if you cannot love me the way I love you, are you at least my friend?"

As you might guess, scholars debate the importance or unimportance of using two different Greek words. Some say that the words are used almost interchangeably throughout the Fourth Gospel and, therefore, any different shades of meaning are irrelevant. The foremost authority on John's Gospel, the late Raymond E. Brown agrees,<sup>9</sup> much to my chagrin, for it weakens my point! But with all due respect to such an eminent scholar, I'm not convinced. Usually, in translating and in writing commentaries, scholars are very precise in identifying the nuances of meaning in Greek and Hebrew words. Why should we be so casual in this instance?

At least I have some company. There are a couple of translations that acknowledge the different words for love. The New International Version which is found in our pew Bibles reads, "**Simon, son of John, do you *truly* love me more than these?**" "**Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.**" That translation translates *agapao* as "truly love". J. B. Philipps, who prepared the first paraphrase of the New Testament in modern English<sup>10</sup> differentiates between the two words this way: "**Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others?**" "**Yes, Lord, you know that I am your friend.**" "Are you my *philos*?" And for the third question he has Jesus say, "**Simon, son of John, are you my friend?**"

What's the point? I think it's important to differentiate between the love God has for you and me and the love we profess for God. Let's not deceive ourselves into believing that when we use the word *love* we are on a level playing field. There is a vast difference. It's not even as close as comparing apples and oranges.

Peter couldn't say he loved Jesus with an agape-kind of love because he knew he didn't. He was too full of himself, often pretending to be more than he was. Sometimes he claimed to know better than Jesus. He often said and did the most inappropriate things.

Every so often I meet people who are troubled at the thought of being a Christian. They think they are not worthy to be a disciple of Jesus. But who is? Was Peter worthy? Was he commissioned a leader in the church because he was worthy? Obviously not. He was called because he was Peter and the Lord loved him and forgave him and proved to him that nothing could come between Jesus and his love for Peter.

In the presence of the risen Lord, secure in the knowledge of his forgiving love, Peter has a new freedom. In discovering that he has feet of clay, he can be much more modest: **"Yes, Lord, you know I love you (I am your friend)."**

God knows us better than we know ourselves. Our professed love for God is always a mixed bag of loyalty and fickleness, righteousness and sin, good works and no works. Even in his new life, some of the old Peter bubbles up to the surface. Even before today's scene is over, Peter is worried about his status with John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," and how he was going to fit into the picture. Jesus politely tells Peter "that's none of your business."

Later on, when the church struggles about how Gentiles should be brought into the fellowship, Peter is confused about the Gospel and even hesitates about what to do. On occasion he plays both ends against the middle and tries to keep everyone happy. When he was in the company of Gentiles, he almost forgot his Jewishness. When among his fellow Jews, he would look down on the Gentiles. A new Peter? Yes, but much of the old still mixed in.

As we will read in a few moments, "the new life does not release us from conflict ... we still have to struggle with disheartening difficulties and problems."<sup>11</sup> Those who think that new life in Christ means that their life is in perfect conformity with the life of Jesus; that God's will is second nature to them; that they are free from disobedience and self-interest, they deceive themselves and don't know what they're talking about.

**"Do you love me,"** Jesus asks of us. **"Will you follow me?"** The best response we can make is to try to do our best. We need to realize that there will be times when we can't do our best and there will be times when we choose not to do our best. Sometimes there is the disheartening reality that our best isn't good enough.

That's the way it is! Such knowledge, however, is not debilitating. Instead, it frees us from exaggerated opinions about ourselves and our own affirmations of faith. **"Lord, you know everything. You know I love you."** And as we mature in that love, "we live in freedom and good cheer, bearing witness on good days and evil days, confident that the new life is pleasing to God and helpful to others."<sup>12</sup>

Look what happens to Peter when he lives with the knowledge of God's forgiving love and with a more honest assessment of himself: he is empowered to do that which he so desperately wants to do. Jesus says to him once again, "Follow me." And in ways that Peter never thought he could, he does, indeed, follow.

The time would soon come for Peter to stand up to those who ordered him not to preach in the name of Jesus. **"We must obey God, rather than any human authority!"**<sup>13</sup> Can you imagine? This is the same Peter who not too long ago hid in the courtyard of the High Priest and wouldn't own up to the fact that he was a disciple. Now he puts his life on the line. What's different? Easter is different. Secure in its word of forgiveness, unpretentious in claims about ourselves, we learn that the power to live the new life comes from God and not ourselves.

When Peter makes great claims about what he will do because he loves Jesus, he fails miserably. He even runs away. When Peter is honest with himself, he finds new power to stand up for the conviction that lies deep in his heart. He ultimately finds the power and strength to die a martyr's death. But not because he makes any claim that he and he alone has the strength to go all the way with Jesus.

The power to live the Christian life is in inverse proportion to our claims to be able to live it. The ones whom God would vote "most likely to succeed" in living the Christian life are those who are least likely to make any claims that they will succeed. That's the way life is. It's God's way of reminding us where real strength and power lie.

I'd like to share a very personal word at this point. I truly believe that I have been called to serve Jesus Christ as the pastor of a congregation, and I've served four of them. I've never been able to figure out why. I don't know what God sees in me. I think well enough about myself to believe that God could have done worse, but God could have done better. Surely God could have called someone with deeper experiences of faith than I have had, or someone with more spiritual gifts or theological acumen. Yet God has called *me*. Is God crazy? Short answer is, yes! Scripture indicates that this is the way God works. **"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong..."**<sup>14</sup>

When the children of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land, they had to be reminded: **"God wasn't attracted to you and didn't choose you because you were big and important — the fact is, there was almost nothing to you. He did it out of sheer love..."**<sup>15</sup> That's the reality for each and every one of us. Jesus calls us to follow him. He calls us to share in his ministry as instruments of God's healing grace in this world. We are called not because we are great; not because we have great faith; not because we are always faithful; we are called because God loves us. Period!

## Endnotes

1. Luke 5:1-11
2. John 18:18
3. Matthew 14:28
4. Matthew 16:22
5. John 13
6. John 13:37
7. Mark 14:29
8. John 18:10
9. *The Gospel According to John, The Anchor Bible*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970),p.1103
10. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1959)
11. From Confession of 1967
12. From Confession of 1967
13. Acts 5:29
14. 1 Cor. 1:26-27
15. Deuteronomy 7:7-8 (*The Message*)