

“Falling, Feasting, and Following”  
John 21:9-19

The summer we met, Susan and I one day decided to take the ferry boat from Southport to Fort Fisher. A beautiful sunny summer day, with gentle waves creating playful ripples in the water. A perfect day for a boat ride. Just one problem. We arrived at the dock just in time to see the ferry gracefully make its departure. No problem. We hopped in the car, drove the sixty or so miles up to Wilmington then down to Fort Fisher, had a good time, then went to the landing to take the ferry home. We arrived in plenty of time, having learned our lesson. Just one problem. Yes, the ferry was there, but was already filled. So, once again we left the rippling waves behind and made our way back up to Wilmington, then down to Southport.

Both times, we missed the boat.

I think that’s what happened to Peter. He missed the boat, as it were, of the resurrection. Peter was no Thomas, he did not doubt Jesus, but I do think he doubted himself. He believed the power of Jesus was not for the likes of him. For Peter had done wrong. He had denied Jesus, not once, but three times. He had not been there. He had run away when Jesus was arrested and stayed scarce while Jesus was crucified. Yes, he had even seen the empty tomb, but could not believe the Risen Lord could have anything else to do with him.

Yes, Jesus was risen from the dead, but Peter’s life was still in the deep darkness of sin, of failure,

of self-reproach. He had failed Jesus, and failed him miserably. And so, the first time, when Jesus appeared to the disciples, as they were huddled in fear behind thick walls and locked doors and greeted them, “Peace be with you, as the father sent me, I am sending you,” Peter did not believe he was included. And the second time, a week later, still in the same room, still behind locked doors, when Jesus appeared to show doubting Thomas he was, in fact, risen from the dead, and again said, “Peace be with you,” Peter did not believe that peace was for him.

So, now, this morning, Peter is back at work. Gone back to his former life, as a fisherman. As if Jesus had never entered his life, never taught him anything, as if Jesus had never been crucified, and never been raised from the dead. I suspect there are many like Peter. Easter morning is such a big day. Folks even get up extra early to come to church, then twice usual crowd throngs to church, to celebrate the Resurrection, but then the next Sunday is historically one of the lowest attended of the year. In fact, I was amazed we got as many as we did to come to worship last week. But, it is as if the Resurrection, having happened, suddenly and swiftly loses its importance. For whatever reason, it is certainly the case with Peter.

Jesus is risen from the dead. But it means nothing to Peter. For Peter, I believe it was indeed his sense of failure, of shame, of having fallen so immeasurably short of expectations. But today, it all changes for Peter.

I’m not so sure Peter was excited when he realized it was Jesus standing on the shore. Did he jump off to swim to Jesus or to hide from him? We’re not sure.

In any case, the encounter begins with a gift, then an invitation. You might remember that Peter and his friends had been out fishing all night and had caught nothing. I am not a fisherman myself, but I understand there are many here today who can relate to the experience. They caught nothing. But then, Jesus offers them a gift of abundance: put your net on the other side of the boat, and your nets will be filled to overflowing. The author of our Scripture, John, is a master of symbolism. It is no wonder he records this detail: obey Jesus and your life is abundant. So, there is a gift, an abundance of fish.

Then, an invitation. Come, have breakfast in my presence.

Moms and nutritionists have been telling us forever: Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

It certainly is for Peter today. Peter, who, well, represents all of us, because his journey is our journey in many ways.

Because today Peter is invited to have breakfast with Jesus. And this breakfast will not just strengthen him for the day, but will restore his very life, his very soul. If the Last Supper was an ending, a last gathering as darkness and death gathered, so this is now a first breakfast, a new meal for a new day, for a new relationship.

Then, as now, meals were offered as a sign of acceptance, of hospitality. That same summer when Susan and I had just met, when she invited me home to have dinner with her family, I knew it was serious. Jesus is serious; he wants the disciples to come to him, to be a part of his ministry. Even

while Peter was still feeling like a failure, Jesus offers him, and the others, the invitation. To breakfast. Obviously, Jesus was not a southerner by birth, else he would have offered grits. But look what he does offer.

Again, symbolism. Bread. Yes, Jesus, the bread of life. Bread. Yes, the body broken for them, but now made whole again in the power of the resurrection. And, fish. Fish? Yes, recall the miracle of the loaves and fishes. And, also, by the time the Gospel was written, the fish had become a symbol second only to the cross, of Christ. You see, if you take the first letters in Greek of the title, “Jesus Christ, son of god,” you get ichthus, which means... fish. Jesus was not just offering them breakfast, he was offering them himself.

But maybe Peter still does not get it. The abundance of fish, the invitation of Christ. And then Christ asks Peter a difficult and important question. You know, so often we stress faith, belief, as our response to Christ. And indeed, well we should. Now, if Jesus had asked Peter, do you believe in me... Peter would have answered, “yes,” I suspect, and then gone back to his fishing business. But Jesus asks him a question that is just as important as do you believe in me. He asks, “Do you love me,” and even more dangerously, how much do you love me? How will your love for me transform your life? ...If at all.

Simon, do you love me? You know I do. Then feed my sheep. Three times Peter has denied, now three times Peter affirms his love, his commitment to Christ. And three times, Jesus reminds Peter the mark of a Christian is not just faith, it is our willingness to feed the sheep. That is, to be a

shepherd.

Is he asking us the same? Belief in Christ is relatively easy. His teaching lifts humanity to the highest of moral planes. Faith in the Resurrection offers hope and promise and even certainty for our eternal souls. But Jesus asks more. He asks how much we love him, because only if we love Jesus dare we to follow him. So here is the question: do we love Jesus enough to follow him? That's what Jesus was asking Peter. Do you love me more than these... or, we could translate it, all this?

Did Peter love Jesus more than his former, safe life of fishing for fish, or dare he fish for souls? How much do we love Jesus? What are we willing to risk for his sake? Dare we risk committing ourselves to faithful attendance at worship? Dare we sometimes choose family over work? Dare we invite a stranger or even a friend to church? Dare we invite someone new into our lives, to share with them in Christian fellowship?

The church is strong and great when people sense its caring. Indeed, it is through our actions in response to the love we have for Christ, that the power of the Risen Lord is made known to most folk. Our greatest successes as a church have been in reaching out to those in need. But so too, have our greatest failures can in failing to reach out to those in need, and sometimes not even knowing that there is a need.

Pastors are often called the shepherds of the flock. It is indeed a high compliment. But it misstates the nature of the church. To call the pastor shepherd and the church members is not complete: as

Christians, we are to be sure, part of the flock, part of the sheep, **but at the same time, you are also shepherds.** Jesus did not just restore Peter to fellowship; he commanded him to share that fellowship with others. I know we love Jesus enough to accept his mercy and his promises of eternal life. But, do we love Jesus enough to dare to be shepherds? That's the question with which Peter had to wrestle. That's the question facing you and me today, as we wrestle with the presence of the Risen Lord in our lives.

There is power in the Risen Christ today, as he appears on the beach. Power even more profound than in miracles. Today we see the power of the Risen Christ is to offer forgiveness to the fallen. The power of the Risen Christ is to invite even those who had denied him into new fellowship, as brothers and sisters.

The power of the Risen Christ is to break down all barriers, even the barrier of sin and the barrier of death, which might divide him from his people. The power of the Risen Christ is the power to give us an opportunity for new life, here and now. The Risen Christ invites you to accept again his comfort, his forgiveness.

But today, Jesus does not just invite us back into the flock. He challenges you, and me, to be shepherds. To feed his sheep. Do we love Jesus enough to risk touching others in his name? And, if so, what would that look like in your life?