

John 21:1–19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ² Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³ Simon 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.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶ He said to them, "Cast the net to 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 there were so many fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt 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. ¹⁸ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to 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." ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

“James Christopher Price!” When my mother addressed me by using my full name, I knew things were going to get serious...and uncomfortable. How many of you have had that experience? When a parent or spouse uses your full name to get your attention, you know there’s a “Come to Jesus” moment in the offing. “Simon son of John...” The Greek wording of John’s gospel actually keeps the Aramaic the disciples spoke: “Simon bar Jonah.” That’s Peter’s full name. And he’s just come to Jesus, who is now addressing him with his full name. Things are about to get serious and uncomfortable...

It’s been a turbulent time, if not a terrible time for those disciples. They have been through a lot, most of it very traumatic – from the brutal death of Jesus on a bloody cross of suffering and sorrow to the jolting shock of a Jesus risen from his grave and appearing in ways they can hardly grasp much less communicate. I’d still be reeling from it all. Wouldn’t

you? And when you're overwhelmed, don't you just want to get life back to *normal*, to get back to the routine things that once made up the comfort zone for your life?

"I am going fishing," Peter said as he looked out over the Sea of Tiberias, his old stomping grounds where he once plied his trade as a fisherman. "We will go with you," fellow disciples and erstwhile fishermen chime in. I can't help but wonder if getting back to something normal was not what led Peter and his companions to get in that boat again, to go out on those waters once so familiar, and to spend time just letting their hands course over the well-known cords of their nets. Shaken disciples trying to get back to normal... Soldiers returned from a foreign battlefield so awful that it makes home surreal. Area residents wary and still cowering because of murders in their neighborhoods. Ukrainians facing another horrid day of destruction and death. Some of you so worried about a loved one, and some of you so missing the love or loves of your life. When overextended, overloaded...overwhelmed, the one thing we crave is just to feel normal gain, and for life to get back to being wonderfully normal again. "I am going fishing," back to what was once so normal.

And what do they discover? They discover that they can't go back to life as normal. They discover failure, frustration, and a call. No fish... They cannot ply the trade the way they once did; it's not working. They cannot go back to the way it was. Nor can any of us disciples. As much as we may so want to go back to the way it was when, it's just not going to happen. For the truth is that while we want to go back when, we need to go forward *until*. "Children, you have no fish, have you?" "Children, you're not able to do "normal", are you? You're not able to concentrate, to keep your eye on the ball, or to sleep through the fitful night, are you?" It's not working, until there comes a call...from beyond, from somewhere else. "Let your nets down on the right side." The direction we need is not in us. The direction we need is from the voice of the One calling to us from that shore beyond these fitful waters, turbulent and frustrating.

And then, with nets almost bursting with fish... "it's the Lord!" And now, even with this huge catch of sudden opportunity and new success, the really important thing is no longer the flapping fish, but getting to our Lord Jesus...who is right here to meet us in the profound hospitality of a simple meal, where we can taste food again, and can just be fed again, and can know grace again.

Sometimes the Church of Christ has a tough time finding an answer as to the "Why?" of death or the "How could this happen?" of evil. But we do have that call of the One who has passed through those dark waters and beckons us to the bright shore. And we do have the hospitality of a simply profound meal where stressed and hurting disciples can taste again of grace in times of need and be fed again with faith for the days ahead.

"Simon son of John!" Uh-oh, here it comes, a "Come to Jesus" moment. "Simon son of John, do you...love me?" After all that's happened – the terrible violence God let happen,

your failure and all your fear, this death of innocence, and this incredible promise of risen life that you cannot yet believe – after all your trial and trauma, “Do you love me?” Well, do you, folks? Do you *love* Jesus? Do you still have it in you after all your trouble and pain? “Do you love me?” asks your Lord!

Wow... We live in a world where everybody wants God to love them... and to like them. But this isn't about whether Jesus loves you; it's about whether you love Jesus...after all that's happened to you. Suddenly Jesus is no longer coddling; he's challenging shaken disciples. And it's exactly what we need. “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Jesus doesn't ask, “Do you believe in me?” because who can believe all that's happened? Jesus doesn't ask, “Have you accepted me as Lord and Savior?” because who can accept all this stuff, and on top of everything else we're having to bear? It is mercifully and challengingly a question of love, to get us in touch with the one thing that will keep us going.

After all that's happened, “do you love me?” asks your Lord Jesus. Do you still have it in you?

And you know what? “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” even now, especially now.

“Feed my lambs... Do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you even after all that's happened to me and to you.”

“Tend my sheep... Do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord, even when I'm hurting, I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.” “The only way you're going to be able to get through all this,” says the Lord “is to love me...by taking care of my sheep.”

We're fooling ourselves if we ever think we can love Jesus without taking care of one another as his flock, his Church. Forget about loving the Jesus in your heart...or sentiment, or ideas, or visions of heaven. If we really love Jesus, we'll focus instead on loving the Jesus in our brother or sister in Christ. “Don't fantasize about being in some sweet heaven with me, and don't go fishing for me by trying to go back to the way it once was. You love me by tending to my sheep right now in their need, hurt, or peril.” The Church of Jesus Christ now has its charge. “The only way you're going to be able to get through this,” says the Lord, “is to love me by taking care of my sheep.” The only way you're going to get *through* this... But the fear, the pain, and the loss – these can make us yearn so for the god who would get us around all our trouble.

“Where was God?” our newspaper headline challenged after the Va. Tech shootings. Shouldn't a God of love protect us from such heinous things, and get us around such

horrible calamity? Inside all of us is a desire for the god who will get us around, and keep us away from the terrible things of sin and death...because we fear that the dark powers of the evil and the dying will be too much for us, and we wonder if the godlessness of the bad will be too much even for the God of the good. Give me the god who will get me around all this...

“Very truly, I tell you...you will stretch out your hands and someone will take you where you do not wish to go,” Jesus tells Peter. He said this to indicate Peter’s death. Our Lord is not the god who is going to get us around having to face the bad things, the hard things, the unfair things, or the deadly things. No... A few weeks ago, Peter had been with Jesus at the Last Supper. There Jesus had told his disciples, “Where I am going, you cannot follow.” And Peter, so sure of himself and of Jesus’ ability to get out of any real danger, replied, “I will never leave you; I will follow you wherever you go.” But when it became clear that Jesus was not going to get around or out of the deadly calamity of the Cross, Peter denied even knowing him, and folded.

You know, we can be so obsessed with the god who should get us around and out of trouble, that we do not even know the God...who’s going to get us through, not around, but *through* the troubles, the fears, and the dying. Jesus Christ is the God who has come to get us through! These are the last recorded words between Simon Peter and Jesus. The words Peter hears from his risen Lord are words about Peter’s death and how he will not want to go. But then come the very last words of Jesus to Peter: “Follow me.” “You couldn’t follow me before; but now, Peter, you can follow, for I am the Way through all the bad to the sheer wonder of the good. Now, Peter, you can follow; for now I’m the One to get you through!” The last words of the risen Jesus to his church: “Even though you know you won’t want to go there, and even though you know it will be a cross you’ll have to face...now, follow me! Through death to life, through suffering to joy, through mortal fear to immortal love – follow me! Don’t try to go back when... and don’t try to get around the tough or the terrible. Follow me! I alone will get you through to the Wonderful and the Incredible.”

“James Christopher Price, after all your failure and troubles, and the world’s tragic sins and unfairness, do you love me?” Put your own name in Jesus’ mouth. He’d want you to! “After all your failures and troubles, and the world’s tragic sins and unfairness, do you love me?”

“Feed my sheep.”

“And when it all finally takes you where you do not want to go... Follow me!”

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