

May 1, 2022  
John 21:1-19

Easter 3  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “The Comeback Apostle”

“Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.’ Jesus said to [Simon Peter], ‘Feed my sheep.’”

Willis Reed was the Most Valuable Player in the National Basketball Association in their 1969-1970 season and captain of the New York Knicks who led his team to the NBA championship series against the Los Angeles Lakers; but it appeared that his season was finished when he suffered a torn thigh muscle in Game 5 of the series and was forced to sit out Game 6. With the series tied 3-3, the deciding game began with Reed again on the sidelines, and all appeared lost as the Knicks fell behind the Lakers. But then something surprising happened: Willis Reed hobbled onto the court, hit two jump shots, and inspired the Knicks to rally and win the game and their first NBA championship. It is remembered as one of the greatest comeback stories in the history of professional basketball.

Despite F. Scott Fitzgerald’s contention that “there are no second acts in American lives,” people around the world love a comeback story. It may be an athlete whose career appeared to be finished but returns to the game and leads his team to a championship; many leagues have an official “Comeback Player of the Year” award for such remarkable stories. It may be an actor or musician whose star had waned but who returns to the top of the charts (Roy Orbison is a good example of this type of comeback, finding success later in life after many years of obscurity). It may be someone who is not well-known but who turns around their lives, overcoming tremendous obstacles and triumphing over great adversity. It may truly be said that *“there is nothing as sweet as a comeback, when you are down and out, about to lose, and out of time.”* (Anne Lamott).

The story of Simon Peter is the tale of a disciple of Jesus Christ who has fallen from tremendous heights. Peter was one of the first disciples called by Jesus to *“follow me, and I will make you fish for people”* (Matthew 4:19). He was a member of the “inner circle” of disciples, invited along with James and John to accompany Jesus up the mountain of our Lord’s transfiguration, where after seeing Jesus *“transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white”* Peter speaks for the trio in proclaiming *“Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for*

*Elijah*” (17:2-4). When Jesus asks his disciples “*who do you say that I am?*” Simon Peter speaks on behalf of all his fellow disciples in confession that “*you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*” (16:16). Jesus then announces that “*you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.*” (16:18). Peter’s position as the lead disciple appears to be assured; his “star” is rapidly ascending.

But the fall of this disciple is equally spectacular when after promising that “*I will lay down my life for you*” Jesus cautions Peter that “*very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.*” (John 13:37-38). This comes to fruition when after Jesus’ arrest Peter denies knowing his Lord: “*One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, ‘Did I not see you in the garden with him?’ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.*” (18:26-27). When Peter realizes what he has done, “*he went out and wept bitterly*” (Luke 22:62); this one-prominent disciple failed his Lord in Jesus’ hour of greatest need.

The likelihood of any comeback story for Peter appears dim when we encounter Peter with his fellow disciples on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias (another name for the Sea of Galilee) in the last chapter of the Fourth Gospel. It is in this familiar setting for these former fishermen that “*Jesus showed himself again to the disciples*” (John 21:1). The phrase “showed himself” (*phaneroo*) is associated with the revelatory dimension of Jesus’ miracles in John’s Gospel, including the miracle at Cana where “*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*” (2:11); the phrase is also used to summarize the purpose of Jesus’ ministry in the proclamation of John the Baptist that “*I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.*” (1:31). At the same time, Peter announces to his fellow disciples that “*I am going fishing*” (21:3), returning to his former occupation after his spectacular failure in denying Jesus. Peter might have even seen himself as a failed disciple and reasoned that if he failed in this calling at least he could fall back on his former profession at which he was once quite good. But failure seems to have tainted his entire life, because Peter and his colleagues “*went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*” Nighttime was the customary time for fishing on the Sea of Galilee; the empty nets with which they return to the shore emphasizes the disciples’ failure and need and establishes the situation that will be corrected when they encounter the risen Jesus.

When the disciples return to shore empty-handed just after daybreak, Jesus is standing on the beach, *“but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus”* (21:4). The Evangelist does not explain why they do not recognize Jesus, especially since they had seen him on two separate occasions previously (20:19, 26); so when he asks them *“children, you have no fish, have you?”* they answer him as if he were a stranger with a simple *“No.”* (21:5). But then Jesus instructs them to *“cast your net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some”* (21:6). Perhaps believing that they have nothing to lose, they follow Jesus’ instructions, and *“now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.”* The miracle, a prodigious catch of fish, occurs in response to Jesus’ word and command, as when Jesus said to the crippled man at the pool by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem *“Stand up, take your mat and walk.”* At once, the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.” (5:8-9). The miraculous catch of fish is the direct catalyst for the Beloved Disciple’s recognition of Jesus; he turns to Peter and proclaims, *“It is the Lord!”* (21:7). The Beloved Disciple recognizes the abundance of fish as deriving from the fullness of Jesus’ gifts (*“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”* – 1:16). Simon Peter’s response is strange: *“When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.”* Peter appears to be caught between his desire to greet Jesus with proper respect (fully clothed) and his eagerness to greet him immediately (jumping into the water, while the rest of the disciples came to shore in the boat, *“dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off”* (21:8). Peter is still eager to see the Lord, but he may not be certain that Jesus is eager to see this disciple who failed him in his hour of need.

When the disciples arrive on shore, *“they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread”* (21:9). The meal Jesus prepares for his disciples is the same food as at the feeding of the Five Thousand (6:1-14). Jesus’ preparation of this meal for his followers confirms that he is the giver of gifts, the source of life-sustaining nourishment, the one who offers the “living water” that *“will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life”* (4:14). The magnitude of the catch confirms that Jesus has performed a great miracle and points to the abundance of the gifts that Jesus offers all his followers. The verb “to haul” (*helko*) is the same verb used to describe those who come to Jesus from God (*“No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.”* – 6:44) and the salvific effect of Jesus’ death (*“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”* – 12:32). The disciple who hauls in the miraculous catch of fish will join God and Jesus in being “fishers of men” who will draw people to Jesus; it is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to his disciples that they will share in his works

*(“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” – 14:12).* When Jesus invites them to *“come and have breakfast,”* the disciples recognize Jesus as the risen Lord and therefore do not question him about his identity. The fellowship of this meal confirms the intimacy of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, the ones who will be sent forth as apostles to proclaim the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as eyewitnesses on this occasion, which is *“the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.”* (21:14). This encounter with the risen Lord *“is thus a story of celebration for the post-resurrection community, because it demonstrates for the community that its life is grounded in an experience of God’s fullness and unprecedented, unexpected gift.”* (Gail O’Day).

When the disciples had finished breakfast, Jesus suddenly turns to Simon Peter and asks, *“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”* (21;15). Peter may have been stunned that Jesus was speaking to him, especially after his spectacular failures and his belief that his time as a disciple of Jesus was finished. Peter responds that *“yes, Lord; you know that I love you,”* after which Jesus commands him to *“feed my lambs.”* Jesus then repeats the question a second time: *“Simon son of John, do you love me?”* and a second time Peter answers *“yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”* Jesus then commands Peter to *“tend my sheep”* (21:16). But this exchange is not finished; a third time Jesus asks *“Simon son of John, do you love me?”* The Evangelist reports that *“Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’”* (21:17); were my failures so spectacular that Jesus now doubts my love for him? So for a third time Peter responds *“Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you,”* and for a third time Jesus commands him to *“feed my sheep.”* The threefold pattern of the conversation between Jesus and Peter seems intended to counterbalance Peter’s three denials of Jesus. Peter may have believed that he was a failure, but Jesus did not see him as a failure; in these verses, Peter is enabled to move beyond his previous relationship with Jesus and claim the unity, intimacy, and mutuality of Jesus and God. This exchange points to a future for Peter that is based on his relationship with Jesus after, rather than before, Jesus’ hour. Jesus’ referring to Peter as “Simon son of John” provides an important link with Peter’s first appearance in John; the risen Jesus’ use of this name repeats the words he spoke when he first met Peter: *“[Andrew] brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter).’” – 1:42).* Jesus’ charge to Peter is regularly interpreted as Peter’s pastoral and apostolic commission; Jesus appoints Peter to be the shepherd of his flock. Jesus is reminding Peter to keep his commandment to *“love one another”* (13:34), to put his

love for Jesus into practice by feeding and tending Jesus' sheep. Jesus is calling Peter to love Jesus' sheep as our Lord has loved them as the "*good shepherd [who] lays down his life for the sheep*" (10:11).

- "With Peter's threefold profession of love, his threefold denial is undone, and Jesus restores the relationship between them. Jesus' mercy is so complete that he does not hold Peter's past sins against him. Instead, Jesus gives Peter the honour and responsibility of serving as the delegated shepherd of the sheep." – Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV.

Jesus' commands that Peter continue our Lord's work as the Good Shepherd which will include laying down his life as Jesus gave of himself on behalf of those he loves. He warns Peter of the time when "*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*" (21:18). Old Testament references to stretching out one's hands are interpreted as foreshadowing Peter's death by crucifixion ("*I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices.*" – Isaiah 65:2). As Jesus glorified God through his death, Peter will now share in that work, as will all who respond to Jesus' invitation to discipleship to "*follow me.*" (21:19). As the Good Shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep, those who are entrusted with this shepherding task must enact that same love for one another:

- "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." – 15:12-14.

Peter and all the disciples are to be known by their share in Jesus' love. Peter's authority does not derive from his "office," but from the fullness of his love for Jesus and Jesus' own.

- "The life to which Jesus summons Peter, and that, indeed, Peter lived, requires of him an act of love that matches Jesus' act: the gift of his life. Peter models for the faith community the ultimate fidelity to Jesus' words, because it fulfills Jesus' core commandment, that his disciples love one another as he has loved them. When Peter three times answers, 'Yes, I love you,' he is not simply giving lip service to his love for Jesus, but is in essence pledging his life. Peter is who Jesus calls his followers to be, a disciple who puts no limits on his love, who will, like Jesus, love 'to the end.'" – O'Day.

The story of Peter as “the comeback apostle” is a reminder of the teaching of St. Paul that *“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is the story of God’s great love for us which God proved *“in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8). It is the God to whom the prophets call us to return no matter how far we have strayed or how spectacularly we have failed to live as God’s people, for our Lord is *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”* (Joel 2:13). It is the message of our Good Shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep, for God *“does not want anyone to be lost. His mercy is infinitely greater than our sins, his medicine is infinitely stronger than our illnesses that he has to heal ... The name of God is mercy.”* (Pope Francis). Peter failed, but he was not labelled a failure by Jesus; Jesus restores Peter so that this “comeback apostle” might be the one who proclaims the Gospel and gives us an example of what it means to walk in newness of life in the forgiveness and redemption that are ours in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- “No matter how serious or how many sins we have committed (Peter’s were very serious), the love and mercy of Jesus is infinitely greater. He seeks us out and invites us to return to him. This scene should give us confidence when we seek reconciliation with Jesus, he forgives us completely and forever. As Pope Francis has beautifully taught, God ‘does not tire of forgiving if we are able to return to him with a contrite heart.’” – Martin and Wright.

Everybody loves a comeback story – and because of God’s great love for us, all our stories can be comeback stories. No matter how far we have strayed from following the ways of the Lord, no matter how often or how spectacularly we have failed to obey our God’s commandments, in Christ there is forgiveness, restoration, and the promise of new beginnings and a fresh start. Because “Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia” we can also be comeback disciples who are renewed and restored by the one who gave his life for us so that we can come back to newness of life.

Amen.