

Flawed Yet Faithful

John 21:15-19

March 31, 2024 – Easter Sunday

Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

He is risen! Happy Easter to you all as we gather to celebrate this special day, the most important day in the church year. You know, everything else only makes sense because of today. Christmas only makes sense because of today, or else Jesus is just a poor immigrant baby born in an animal stable. Good Friday only makes sense because of today, or else Jesus is just an activist prophet murdered by the state. Because of today, because of Jesus' resurrection, everything makes sense.

So, you'd think I'd be preaching the resurrection story today. This is the first time in my ministry that I've not preached the resurrection on Easter. That might seem sacrilegious, but to be fair, is there anything I could say to add to the power and joy of this day? One year, I got up to preach the Easter sermon and then just sat down because I had nothing to say, but the choir insisted they wanted to hear me talk for 20 minutes about Easter. Or at least I assume that's what the applause was for when I sat down.

So, the story I'm preaching today is not THE resurrection story, but it's A resurrection story. During the season of Lent, we've been spending time with Peter, Jesus' most flawed yet faithful disciple. Peter's path of faith is marked by great strides forward. Peter is the one who declares that Jesus is the Messiah; Peter is the one who dares to step out of the boat and walk on the water toward Jesus; Peter is the one who says at the Last Supper, "Even if everyone else may flee, I will never desert you." Peter was a man of great faith, to whom Jesus says in Matthew's gospel, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven."

Well, you have to wonder if Peter lost those keys and locked himself out based on his moments of blinding humanity. Peter's great strides are matched by his stupendous stumbles. It is to Peter that Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!" after Peter tries to talk Jesus out of the plan to be crucified. It is Peter who begins to sink into the water and has to be rescued by Jesus when he begins to doubt Jesus' power. And it is Peter who denies knowing Jesus after Jesus is arrested and taken to the Jewish council for interrogation.

That reminds me of a comedy routine by Dan St. Paul called "The First Baseball Game." In the game, Peter is pitching and Jesus is catching. Jesus gives him the sign for which pitch to throw, but Peter denies it. Jesus gives a second sign and Jesus denies him again! After Peter denies Jesus' sign a third time, Jesus goes out to give Peter a "Sermon on the Mound." See folks, this is what happens when Opening Day of baseball and Holy Week coincide.

The famous three-fold denial is recorded in each gospel for all of history to read. It's tempting to bash Peter and disparage him for not living up to his promise. Didn't he say, just a few hours before, he would never desert Jesus? But I'm not ready to string Peter up by his thumbs just yet, because I know I'm just as guilty of violating my own promises. When 10 of our young people make their confession of faith and are baptized in a few weeks, they'll promise to do things like resist temptation, be faithful in their worship attendance, and readily share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. How well do any of us fulfill those promises? Peter's denial is more well-known, but we've all promised things to God on which we haven't delivered. In our moments of faith and our moments of doubt, we are no different than Peter.

You wouldn't blame Peter if he just disappeared from the scene, slinking back into the bushes like Homer Simpson in that meme. But Jesus isn't done with him yet. This story is the

first time Jesus and Peter have met since the denial, but Jesus doesn't upbraid him for his past failures. Instead, he asks him about his present and future commitment. This time Peter is not being asked if he knows Jesus, but if he loves him. This three-fold expression of Peter's love for Jesus effectively cancels out Peter's three-fold denial.

How often do you hear your full name said out loud? I'm not talking about those times as a kid when you knew you were in real trouble. When's the last time you've heard your full name spoken? On the count of three, say your full name out loud. (Pause) For me, it was probably my wedding a few years ago. We say people's full names when they are baptized or ordained. So, it usually only happens on the most important occasions, ones marked by life-changing promises. In the very first chapter of John's gospel, upon meeting a new disciple, Jesus says, "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)." When Jesus called Peter, he used his full name.

And now, as these two steal a quiet moment away from the others, Jesus says once again, "Simon, son of John." You see, Peter is being called again to do Jesus' work. Never mind that Peter's already been called to do this and failed. Never mind that Peter revoked his promise. Never mind that Peter fell away. Jesus is once again calling his name.

Think about the power of another chance after a failure. I remember how hungry I was on that Sunday evening, when the youth group had gathered to break a 36-hour fast we'd undertaken to raise funds for a local food bank. As the youth leader, I felt compelled to model the importance of discipline, so I had not eaten a thing for 36 hours. As first pizza starting cooking in the oven, I and the youth all started salivating. The tiny oven dinged and the pizza was done, so I carefully took it out of the oven and handed it to Ben, my most rambunctious youth. In his enthusiasm to get the pizza to the table, Ben spun around – and the pizza went flying off the cutting board. All our stomachs gurgled a collective "No!" as we watched it sail through the air and land upside down on the floor. The moment it landed, we were so angry I was seriously concerned they youth going to eat Ben instead. Poor Ben felt horrible.

After wiping up the pizza sauce and the tears, I put the next pizza in the oven and we waited for what felt like another 36 hours. When the oven dinged, I took out the pizza...and then called Ben over. I handed him the pizza and said, "Ben, you've got this." And he delivered the pizza flawlessly to the ravenous wolves who ate it so fast their starving youth minister didn't get a piece. Think about the power of a second another chance after a failure.

No matter how many pizzas we drop, no matter how many times we break our promises, intentionally and unintentionally, no matter how many times we don't resist temptation or aren't faithful in our worship, Jesus still looks at us and calls us by name. When Jesus was asked by a disciple how many times a person should be forgiven – the disciple who asked that question, incidentally, was our friend Peter – Jesus said seventy times seventy times. No matter how far we run, no matter how far we fall, Jesus never stops calling our name, he never runs out of second chances.

For Peter, that new call comes with a new purpose. "Feed my sheep." Jesus, the good shepherd, now passes on that responsibility. Jesus had to know the difficulty of what he's instructing Peter to do. This command sounds great when huddled around a warm fire on the beach with the Risen Lord and Savior, but it becomes a lot more challenging when you are actually dealing with the sheep. Following Jesus means we must love his sheep, even when the sheep aren't particularly loveable. How do you love the sheep who gets on your nerves, the sheep who is so needy, the sheep who doesn't know when to stop baa-ing, the sheep who broke

their promise to you? How do you love those sheep? You remember that Jesus also called them by name. They are not your sheep; they are Jesus' sheep. We are simply the shepherds.

Jesus sums up this command by repeating once again his original call to Peter: "Follow me." Ironically, Peter will be following Jesus into the same kind of death Jesus suffered. Tradition holds that Peter was also martyred by crucifixion and requested to be crucified upside down because he didn't deserve to die in the same manner as his Messiah. Jesus alludes to Peter's martyrdom when talks about how someone will "stretch out your hands," presumably to nail them to a cross.

We are ALL called to lay down our lives for Christ. Some people are called to die for Christ. Some are called to live for Christ. Some are called to serve in faraway places. Some are called to serve right where they are. Some are called to serve in the ministry; some are called to serve at a soup kitchen; some are called to serve communion. There are a thousand other ways to lay down our lives for Christ. After Jesus washes his disciples' feet he tells them, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." To love one another means to feed Jesus' sheep. If your faith leads you to hate, to exclude, to privilege one group of people or one nation over another, that's not following Jesus. The love Jesus calls us to show is not defined by power and authority but sacrifice and humility. Everyone can love Jesus with words; only those who are truly following him will back it up with actions.

Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Tend my flock. Follow me. How are you doing with that? How well are you living out your baptismal promises? A life of faith has its ups and downs, doesn't it? That's OK. No matter how often you've denied him, let him down, dropped the proverbial pizza, Jesus hasn't given up on you. He's not asking you to try harder. He's asking you to accept his love, and to accept yourself as being loved. There's another meal that's been prepared, not a pizza, but piece of bread and cup of juice, representing the abundance of grace and forgiveness Jesus offers each one of us. Listen. Can you hear it? Jesus is calling your name. Yes, you! And he's saying two simple, profound, life-changing words. "Follow me."