

"Gone Fishin'"

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May 11, 2025

¹After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon 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.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He 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. ⁷That 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. ⁸But 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.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So 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. ¹²Jesus 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. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When 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." ¹⁶A 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." ¹⁷He 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. ¹⁸Very 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." (John 21:1-19)

Where do you go when you need a break? When the treadmill of life is running way too fast and you want to stop that crazy thing... when you feel strung out, stressed out, worn out... where do you go, what do you do, to find some solace and get yourself together?

We all need those kinds of places, and the disciples were no different. We have to remember that this story from John's gospel takes place immediately after Easter, perhaps even the day after. It had been, we have to say, quite a week. From the highs of Palm Sunday, down into the dark and tragic lows of Holy Week -- the betrayal, arrest, trial, flogging, and execution of Jesus-- then back up to the glorious but shocking revelation of Easter - the disciples had been physically and emotionally whipsawed up and down, back and forth, by momentous events. It seems from this text that they needed a minute to catch their breath and think things through. Peter knows just what he needs. "I am going fishing," he announces. Six others immediately chime in, "We'll go with you."

It reminds me of a sign I remember seeing at a friend's lake house when I was little. It was one of those light-hearted signs that you find in vacation homes. It said simply, "If I've gone missin', I've just gone fishin'."



It seemed a perfect way to clear the air. As the sun began to set, they would be able to sail away from the crowds. The gentle bobbing of the waves would be comforting. The water lapping against the boat would be soothing. And, perhaps most importantly, they would be doing something familiar. They had been fishing their entire lives, so they wouldn't have to think. Just cast the nets like they always did.

Unfortunately, it was not working out as they hoped. Peace continued to elude them, because -- cast after cast -- the nets came back empty. They had hoped a little fishing would make them feel better, but it was yet another failure. Especially for Peter.

While all the disciples were exhausted by all that had happened, Peter was carrying an additional burden. Just days before, after the arrest of Jesus on Maundy Thursday, Peter had followed Jesus to the house of the high priest, where he was being interrogated. Standing out in the courtyard around a charcoal fire, he and other onlookers anxiously waited in the cold and dark for any news they might hear. It was there that a woman recognized him. "*You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?*" she asked. He said, "*I am not.*"

Then others asked him, "*Aren't you one of his disciples?*" Again, Peter denied it, saying "*I am not.*"

Finally, one of the servants of the high priest himself, said "*Did I not see you in the garden with him?*" A third time, Peter denied it. At that moment a cock crowed, and Peter remembered the fateful prediction Christ had made not so long before: "*Very truly I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.*"¹

I expect it was the lowest point of his life. As a leader among the disciples, Peter was known as the most loyal, courageous, and gifted among them. He had even publicly vowed to lay down his life for Jesus if needed. But in Christ's moment of greatest need, Peter withered in the face of danger. With one lie repeated three times, he had disavowed his calling and betrayed his Lord. And now, in the darkness, as he pulled empty nets into his boat, those nets were a painful reminder of his empty promise and the empty state of his soul.

And what was the most haunting thought? That Jesus knew. The risen Christ knew that Peter had failed him. You have to think that Peter, the hapless fisherman, worried that his relationship with Jesus was broken beyond repair... broken forever.

But the point of this passage is that the story did not end with Peter's fear, or Peter's failure. As the dawn breaks, a familiar voice calls out to them to cast the net on the other side. All of the sudden, an empty net is full to the point of bursting. In just one cast, hours of failure are swallowed up by a moment of great success. They recognize the voice; they believe it is Jesus, but they cannot see clearly enough to know.

And then, in the breaking light of dawn, the disciples see him next to another fire. As the boat comes to shore, the disciples see Jesus tending another charcoal fire. A meal was already cooking over it -- freshly caught fish and enough bread for everyone. And Jesus says to them, "*Come and have breakfast.*"

For Peter, it was a tale of two fires. The first fire smoldered in the darkness; the new one burns brightly in the dawning light. The first fire was a place of peril; this new fire is a place of welcome and comfort. The first fire had been a grave that left Peter hollow and empty; this new one is a table set with the bread of life meant to fill and satisfy. The first fire was a painful reminder of death and failure; this new fire is a hopeful harbinger of new life and possibility.

And it is the light of that new day, and the warmth of that new fire, that Jesus addresses the elephant in the room -- or, more accurately, the awkwardness on the beach. As Peter suspected,

¹ John 18:17-27; John 13:38.

Jesus knew. Jesus knew that, around the first fire in the darkness, Peter had been asked three times, "Do you know him?"

And three times, around that first fire, Peter had lied, saying "I do not."

And Jesus confronts this betrayal head on. "*Simon son of John*," Jesus asks, "*do you love me?*"

"*Yes, Lord*," Peter answers, "*you know that I love you*."

A second time Jesus asks him, "*Simon son of John, do you love me?*"

"*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you*."

For a third time, the question comes. "*Simon son of John, do you love me?*"

And the scripture says it plainly. The third question hurt. It hurt because Peter knew what Jesus was doing. It hurt because Jesus was pressing uncomfortably on the deep wound in their relationship. But Peter's answer does not change, except that he adds an even more emphatic declaration of trust. "*Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you*."

Let me ask you this: if we were the ones who had been betrayed, could we forgive? If we were the ones who had been let down in our hour of need, could we forget? If we stood face to face with someone who had wronged us in the shadows, would we dare to give that person another chance in the light of day? It is hard to imagine that we could or would. But Jesus could. And Jesus did. Christ has no interest in rehashing Peter's failures of the past. He is only interested in the hopeful possibilities of the future.

That kind of forgiveness seems so high to us, so high that we cannot attain it. But in the death and resurrection of Christ, we see that kind of grace. In the death and resurrection of Christ, the true nature of God is fully revealed. And it is revealed in a tale of two fires. One was a fire of sin and failure. The other is a fire of grace and hope. One was a fire that leaves us empty, the other fills us beyond measure.

It has often been said that defeat is actually a better teacher than victory. The English author and reformer Samuel Smiles certainly believed that to be true. "We learn wisdom from failure much more than from success," he once wrote. "We often discover what will do, by finding out what will not do... he who never made a mistake never made a discovery."² That was the enduring lesson that Peter learned in that breakfast on the beach... around that second fire, where Jesus gave Peter a new mission and a new life. In the boundless grace of Christ, Peter found his true mission – to feed Christ's sheep, to tend His lambs. Right from the very beginning, when Christ first invited Peter to follow him, he said he would teach him to be a fisher of men, an angler for people. And despite all that they had been through, it was only after Easter that Peter really understood what that meant.

We all have high hopes for the work we do and the love we give. And we all fall short. We all fail to live up to the expectations of others. We all fail to live up to the expectations we set for ourselves. But to live in the light of Christ is to live in a state of boundless and perpetual grace. It is a fact of life: Sometimes our nets are going to come back empty. Sometimes we will be discouraged. Sometimes we wonder if we can keep going. But whenever and however we may fall, Christ is always there, ready to pick us up, brush us off, and send us back out in love to feed the lambs and tend the sheep. When we live in the light of Christ, we are set free to fail, to learn, and to try again. Because sometimes we learn what we are supposed to do only by finding out what will not do, and sometimes our biggest mistakes lead to our greatest discoveries.

So, I ask again. Where do you go when your nets keep coming up empty? Where do you go when you feel strung out, stressed out, worn out? Where do you turn when your confidence has gone missin'? Perhaps it is just Christ inviting you to go fishin. **Amen.**

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/390439-we-learn-wisdom-from-failure-much-more-than-from-success>