

Peter's Denial & Re-entry

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, August 2, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [John 18:12-18, 25b-27](#) and [John 21:15-19](#)

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Though the most famous verse from the Christian testament comes from John's gospel – John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." – I don't think John's a very quotable gospel. In fact, one of the problems I have with quoting John 3:16 is that quoting it on a poster at a baseball game takes it out of its context. Quoting that one verse outside the narrative John is telling makes it much easier to misinterpret and even abuse the verse. And that happens. Frequently. The text is cheapened and the mystery of the text is lost. Even the pithiest, most quotable verses in John's gospel belong in the narrative.

Take today's texts. Today's texts are part of a larger story arc. There is a lot that goes on in chapters 13 through 21 of John's gospel, even though it covers a relatively brief period of time. In part because Jesus addresses his disciples at length, it takes John nine chapters to get from the Last Supper through his resurrection stories. The main focus of these nine chapters, as one might suspect, is Jesus.

A subplot in these nine chapters focuses on Simon Peter. In chapter 13, when Jesus gathers with his disciples to share a final meal with them and to wash their feet, Jesus tells Simon Peter that he will deny Jesus three times before the dawn when the rooster crows.

At first, it seems like Simon is going to stick by Jesus. In chapter 18, when soldiers and police come to arrest Jesus, Simon Peter tries to prevent the arrest. He draws some kind of knife, wields it wildly, and cuts off the ear of a person enslaved by the high priest. Why Simon wasn't arrested right then is beyond me. They arrest the nonviolent Jesus, but not the knife-wielding Simon. Luke and Matthew also say that a disciple cuts off the ear of one of the people who have come to arrest Jesus, but only John names the disciple (he says it was Simon Peter), and only Luke says that Jesus healed the man's ear.

Even though Jesus is hauled off to the high priest's home, according to John, Simon Peter and an unnamed disciple followed Jesus there. Simon isn't able to get into the courtyard of the high priest's home – he doesn't know the right people – until the unnamed disciple intervenes.

We heard the dialogue that happens once Simon Peter is in the courtyard. Three different people, people without any political or social clout, ask Simon if he's part of Jesus' posse. All three times, Simon denies any association with Jesus. As he makes his third denial, the rooster crows – just as Jesus said would happen.

Chapter 19 ends with Jesus being buried. The Sabbath passes in one verse in chapter 20. Then, on Sunday, Mary Magdalene (who I like to call Mary the Tower because that's

what Magdalene means¹) goes to the tomb and finds the stone rolled away. Simon and the unnamed disciple Jesus loved are together and Mary tells them about the disturbed tomb. They rush off to see what has happened.

That evening, the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples who are hanging out behind locked doors. The following week, Jesus makes another appearance to the disciples who gathered again behind locked doors. Thomas is there this second time; Simon Peter was there both times.

And then we get to chapter 21. Some time has passed; it's not clear how much. Jesus has made some additional appearances to the disciples, the details of which John does not share. Yet I get the impression that for the disciples, things are in limbo, directionless. It's not clear what to do next. Simon tells some of the disciples he's with that he's going to go fishing, and the others join him. Apparently, it is evening when this happens, because the text says the disciples fish all night and catch nothing.

I've long heard this story as one about a directionless disciple, maybe even one who is feeling guilty about denying knowing Jesus right when Jesus most needed a friend, feeling like he had to do something. So he does the thing he knows how to do. He goes fishing. And the others go with him. Maybe they don't have any idea of what to do either.

While they're out in the boat fishing, the resurrected Jesus shows up on the beach. He gives the disciples some instructions on where to fish, and suddenly they have this huge hall of fish. When they get ashore, they see a charcoal fire. Jesus has made them breakfast.

Once they're done with breakfast, Jesus talks directly to Simon Peter. Three times, Jesus asks him, "Do you love me? Three times, Simon Peter answers, "You know I love you." And three times, Jesus gives Simon Peter an instruction to tend to his flock.

A lot of ink has been used to write about the number 3 in this story arc. Most of the commentary that focuses on the 3s see this as a story of betrayal and redemption. They see Simon Peter's denial of knowing Jesus as a great sin, and they see Jesus asking Simon three times if he loves him as Jesus wiping away the stain of that sin, one denial redeemed at a time. I see elements of this interpretation in the story, but with much less cosmic judgment.

What if, when Jesus tells Simon that he will deny Jesus three times, it's more a directive than a prediction? Peter has said that he will lay down his life for Jesus, and Jesus responds by saying that instead Simon will deny knowing him. I can hear that as being a recommendation for action as easily as a prediction of fear. It's as if Jesus is saying to him, "Very soon there will come a moment when the right thing to do, the wise thing to do, the action that will provide you a future, is to deny knowing me."

I know that, as John tells the story, Simon Peter isn't kicked out of the community for denying Jesus. Simon rushes to the tampered tomb when Mary the Tower reports to Simon the Rock that something has happened to it. Simon is locked inside with the other disciples

¹ This is an important insight from Dr. Elizabeth Schrader that is summarized in the first few paragraphs by Amy Courts in "Mary the Tower," <https://www.amycourts.com/written-things/mary-the-tower-john-1117-27>.

both times Jesus reveals himself in the resurrection. And Simon the Rock is still enough of a leader that, when he says he's going fishing, a bunch of the guys go with him.

If anyone put Simon Peter on the outside of the group after he denied knowing Jesus, it was Simon Peter. I now how easy it is to judge myself harshly – more harshly than people around me do, more harshly than Jesus does. Maybe the questions Jesus asks Simon are about helping him forgive himself, to help him see himself as worthy of belonging.

We miss some subtle though important things by reading the English translation. John's gospel was written in Greek, and the Greek has multiple words that we translate as "love." Two of them get used in this passage. "Simon, do you love me?" Jesus asks. The love that Jesus asks Peter about is *agape* love, the kind of love that has no conditions, the kind of love that sacrifices for one another. This is the kind of love that God has for us.

Simon Peter answers each time by saying that he has *phileo* love for Jesus, the kind of love that you have for a dear friend.

When Jesus asked Simon his question the third time, he changes it. The third time when Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" he uses *phileo*. I think that Jesus might be saying that while your love it is not as complete as God's love for you, Simon, your love is good enough to be my disciple. It's only after this third question, this question of "Do you love me like a dear friend?" that Jesus tells Simon what the next thing to do is: "Follow me."

I think Peter was right to say *phileo*. As hard as we try, our ability to love without condition is limited to little moments here and there. Though we hold the ideal of *agape* love, we are going to mess it up. The good news is that Jesus continues to invite us back in whenever we think we belong on the outside. Jesus continues to love us with *agape* love and he asks us to follow him. This is what being grounded in community is all about: recognizing that we need to be gentle with one another and with ourselves so that we can be brave together. We each come in with our own pain, our own brokenness, and still, every time, Jesus invites us back to the table. Thanks be to God.

Amen.