

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 17, 2022
Easter Sunday**

**THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES
John 21:1-19**

In the Call to Worship this morning, we heard Matthew's account of the announcement of the resurrection of Jesus to the two women, Mary Magdalene and another Mary (not the mother of Jesus but a different Mary) who had come to the tomb (Matthew 28:1-10). Now we turn to John 21, which is not an account of the resurrection but of an encounter between the risen Lord Jesus and several of His disciples that took place more than a week after the resurrection, sometime during the 40-day period before the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Word as it comes to us from John 21:1-19.

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One of the best storytellers I know, Steve Brown, says that when he was a pastor in the village of East Dennis, MA, on Cape Cod, the Parks Commissioner was a member of the church. There was only one "park" in the village: the local cemetery. It was the Parks Commissioner's job to mow the grass and clean the tombstones in the graveyard. Many of the graves were very old, and the people buried there were buried before the Commonwealth of Massachusetts required concrete coffin liners. One day, while cleaning a gravestone, the ground gave way and the Parks Commissioner fell into the hole and onto the rotting coffin. As he was pulling himself up out of the hole, someone driving through the cemetery saw him. You can guess the visitor's reaction! Laughing about it, the Parks Commissioner said: "He thought I was a corpse climbing out. I've never seen anybody get out of the graveyard so fast. He almost hit a light pole on his way out!" (Steve Brown, www.keylife.org, 4.7.2022, "Why Do So Many People Go to Church on Easter?")

It is not every day that you see someone climbing out of a grave. Or coming out of a tomb. Jesus was *not* a corpse escaping a grave. He was *not* a dead man walking. He *was* dead, it is true. He really *did* die. There was no doubt about it.

And Jesus really *did* rise again from the dead through "the power of an indestructible life" (Hebrews 7:16). As Steve Brown says, the resurrection is the exclamation point (!) that God put on everything Jesus said and did.

Among the many reasons to believe in the resurrection are the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus recounted in the four Gospels and the first chapter of the Book of Acts. John describes one of these appearances in John 21.

John tells us that following His resurrection, Jesus had already appeared to Mary Magdalene, who mistook Him at first for a gardener (John 20:11-18); to His disciples, minus Thomas,

behind locked doors (20:19-23); and then to His disciples again a week later, this time with “doubting Thomas” present (20:24-29). But the disciples were still in a kind of limbo. They weren’t sure what it all meant. They weren’t sure what to do. So, Peter decided to do what he knew best. Being a fisherman, he decided to go fishing. And several of the other disciples went with him. John tells us the crew, in addition to Peter, included himself (John) and his brother James [the sons of Zebedee], Thomas, Nathanael, and two others whom he doesn’t name. We don’t know for sure, but the two unnamed disciples may have been Philip and Peter’s brother Andrew (also a fisherman by trade).

This fishing excursion may have been a form of therapy for Peter, as he tried to come to terms with how he had failed to stand up for Jesus by denying three times that he was one of Jesus’ disciples.

Peter was a man of colossal contradictions. It is obvious that he had the most dominant personality among the twelve disciples. He had great strengths and glaring weaknesses. At times he had the most profound insights. At other times he was a complete blockhead.

He received high praise from Jesus, and a stinging rebuke as well. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter was the great confessor. He recognized Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). To which Jesus said: “Way to go, Peter! You got it!” (I’m paraphrasing what Jesus actually said ☺.) But at Jerusalem, after Jesus was arrested, he became the great denier. When the chips were down, after crowing that he would never turn away from Jesus, that he would remain faithful to Jesus even if it cost him his life, Peter failed miserably. Three times he denied his relationship to the Lord Jesus. Not once. Not twice. Three times. He couldn’t get the memory of his failure out of his mind. It haunted him day and night. Even the resurrection of Jesus didn’t erase it from his memory.

There is a book by Christian psychologist and counselor H. Norman Wright called *Making Peace with Your Past*. A lot of people need to do just that. Maybe you do. Maybe you carry around some shame for something you said or did that you desperately wish you could take back. Maybe it was rebellion against your parents or someone else in authority. Maybe, in a moment of insanity, you cheated on your spouse. Maybe it was more than a moment. Maybe you embezzled money from your employer. Maybe you said something in anger that you deeply regret. Maybe you froze in fear when you had an opportunity to speak up for Jesus. Maybe you’ve done something along the way that has left you with the feeling that you are somehow unfit and unworthy of respect and trust.

Peter needed to make peace with his past. He needed a second chance. Not that he deserved it, but a second chance is what he needed. The truth is that everybody needs a second chance. And a third. And a fourth. And on and on. I sure do. Because we all blow it, each of us in our own way. We all sin and fall short of the standard of God’s glory. Not a day goes by that you and I don’t need another chance. It is an indisputable fact of life.

But you know what? I’ve got some good news for you. Some *very* good news. The good news is that despite the ways we blow it, despite the ways we make a mess of things, despite our failures, God loves us anyway. Other people may give up on you, and you may give up on

yourself, but Jesus does not and will not give up on you. He is always there, ready to give you another chance. That's one reason we say His grace is amazing.

As much as he needed to make peace with his past, Peter couldn't do it by himself. Neither can you and I. Peter needed Jesus to make peace with his past. He needed a second chance, and only Jesus could give it to him.

It was not unusual to go fishing at night. Much of the fishing done in the Sea of Galilee in those days was done at night. It still is. The fishermen used nets to catch the fish. On this night, though, the disciples, even though they were experienced fishermen, caught nothing. Not a single fish. Their nets were empty. The night was a total failure ... until Jesus called to them from the shore and told them to throw the net on the right side of the boat.

What do you think: Did Jesus see something from His vantage point on the beach that the guys in the boat couldn't see? Maybe. But I don't think that's it. I think that in His sovereign power and goodness Jesus summoned the fish to be there as a sign that it was Him – that He was the one waiting for the disciples on the beach.

John figured it out first. He said: "It's the Lord!" (21:7). But Peter, as usual, was the first to act. He immediately threw on his outer clothing, jumped into the lake, and swam ashore to meet Jesus.

Jesus did not just "happen" to be there, waiting on the shore for the disciples. It was no accident that He was there, making breakfast for them. Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of sinners, the Lord of heaven and earth, didn't think it beneath His dignity to fix breakfast for His disciples. They weren't looking for Him. They didn't expect to see Him there. But Jesus was looking for them. Even after His resurrection, there was still more of Himself that He wanted to give them.

And, obviously, Jesus and Peter had some unfinished business to take care of. After breakfast, they went for a walk. Earlier Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus asks Peter three times to reaffirm his love for Jesus.

What Jesus is concerned about now is not Peter's failures in the past but his decision in the present. Jesus has already forgiven Peter. He has already taken care of Peter's past. He has taken care of your past. Thank God, He has taken care of mine. What He asks of Peter, and of you and me, is to let go of the past, to follow Him in the present, and to trust Him for the future.

Have you done that? Have you let go of the failures in the past? Have you given your failures to Jesus? If you've never done it, will you do it today? Jesus can set you free from the guilt and shame of whatever you've done. If He could do it for Peter, He can do it for you and me.

Listen to this: There is room in the kingdom of God for failures. In the family of God, there is room for people who have blown it along the way. People like Peter. And you. And me. The

grace of God is sufficient for you. The mercies of God really are new every morning. The God of second chances is always there, waiting for us to come back to Him.

You probably know that there is more than one word for “love” in Greek, which is the language of the New Testament. You may know that in verse 15, where Jesus says to Peter: “Do you love me more than these?”, and again in verse 16, where He asks Peter: “Do you truly love me?”, the word Jesus uses for “love” is the word *agape*, which refers to a self-giving, self-sacrificing love that always seeks what is best for the beloved. It is the kind of love Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 13. It is the kind of love that prompted God to send His Son into the world to die for us, as it says in John 3:16. It is the kind of love demonstrated by Jesus when He went to the cross and gave up His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10). It is the kind of love to which Jesus called us when He gave His disciples the new commandment to “love one another, as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

There was a time, before his denials of Jesus, when Peter would have answered Jesus’ questions without any hesitation or reservation. There was a time when he would have said to Jesus: “Of course I love you! Nobody loves you more than I do. And you can count on my love and loyalty for as long as I live, even if I have to die for you.”

But that was then. And this was now. Peter had been sobered by his failure. He had been chastened and humbled. No longer did he think more highly of himself than he should. Now he saw just how weak he really was.

So, in reply to Jesus, he affirmed his love for Him. But all of his previous bluster and boasting were gone. The balloon of his spiritual pride had been punctured. He didn’t even presume to use the same word for “love” that Jesus used. . Instead of *agape*, he used the word *phileo*, which means the affection or love of a friend. He said to Jesus: “You know I love (*phileo*) you” (21:15, 16).

Then, when Jesus asks him to reaffirm his love a third time, Jesus Himself uses *phileo* (21:17). Some biblical scholars make a big deal about the different words for “love” used by Jesus and Peter. It is not a small thing. It is significant that Peter has been so humbled by his failure that he finally recognizes how small and fickle his love for Jesus is. But the more important thing here is not the distinction in the words for “love,” but the fact that Peter does reaffirm his love for Jesus and Jesus does restore and recommission Peter to ministry in His service.

Peter’s commission is to feed both the lambs (the little ones) and the full-grown sheep with the rich spiritual food of God’s Word. He is to shepherd the flock of God’s people, to take care of them, to lead them and guide them and guard them and watch over them. It is a mission Peter would take seriously for the rest of his life.

His momentous failure in the hour of testing notwithstanding, Peter was given a second chance. He received a new and renewed mission from the God of second chances. You see, not only is there room for failures in the kingdom of God, there is also a job for failures, a mission for failures, a place of service for failures in the work of God’s kingdom. In giving

this new commission to Peter, Jesus did not focus on yesterday. It wasn't about the past. In His death on the cross Jesus had already taken care of Peter's past. This was not about what happened in the past. It was about the present. And the future. It was about today and where we go from here.

Peter, of course, was not the only person in the Bible who was given a second chance. God used a murderer named Moses to deliver the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. There is a persecutor named Paul who was transformed by God's grace into the greatest missionary in Christian history.

There is a prostitute named Rahab who, because of her faith, was spared when the walls of Jericho came a-tumbling down and became an ancestor of Jesus Himself. Zacchaeus was a lying, cheating tax collector whose life was turned right side up when he met Jesus. Jonah ran away from God and ended up in the belly of a whale, but God still used him to bring revival to the city of Nineveh.

And what about the Samaritan woman at the well, with her long history of failed relationships? Or the woman caught in adultery? Or the prodigal son in Jesus' parable who finally came to his senses after wasting his inheritance and indulging himself in all kinds of worldly pleasures, and went back home to be welcomed by the loving embrace of a father who had never stopped loving him, never stopped praying for him, never stopped hoping he would come home.

In the parable, Jesus gives us a picture of what God is like. Like the prodigal's father, He is the God of second chances. And third. And fourth.

None of us deserves a second chance. It is a gift of grace pure and simple that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will.

A businessman kept a picture of his wife in his office. After commenting on how nice it was, a visitor noticed the businessman had tears in his eyes. So, he asked: "Why are you crying?"

The businessman said: "There was a time when I was unfaithful to my wife, and she found out about it. She was so deeply hurt, she was going to leave me and take the kids with her. I was overwhelmed at the mistake I had made, and I shut the affair down. I went to my wife in total brokenness. Knowing that I didn't deserve to be forgiven, I asked her to forgive me. And she did.

"This picture was taken shortly after that. When I look at this picture, I see a woman who forgave me. I see a woman who was willing to stand with me in this picture. You look at it and say: 'Nice picture.' But when I look at it, I see my life given back to me again."

That is an act of grace. Amazing grace. And grace is God's specialty. Please don't leave today thinking that sin – whatever your particular sin may be – is not a big deal. *It is*. Please don't think that God doesn't take sin seriously. *He does*. Very seriously. It is nothing to play around with. But the Bible tells us again and again that the Lord is compassionate and gracious. He is

slow to get angry and abounding in love. He is ready and willing to forgive anyone who comes to Him with a heart of repentance, no matter what we have done or how we have failed. He is, and will always be, the God of second chances.

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Today is my 25th Easter as the pastor of this church I love. The first time I preached here was almost exactly 25 years ago, on April 13, 1997. It wasn't Easter Sunday. It was two weeks after Easter. It was the day the members of Faith voted to call me as the pastor of Faith. With two exceptions, I think I have preached every Easter since. In 2008, I was hospitalized with a traumatic brain injury following surgery to remove an acoustic neuroma. That was an ordeal. I'm glad God gave me another chance after that! Bob Barnett preached that Easter Sunday. One other year David Fischler preached on Easter.

Beyond those two exceptions, it has been my honor and privilege to proclaim from this sacred pulpit the great good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and its meaning for us today every Easter for the last 25 years.

Today is my last Easter Sunday as your pastor.

What do I want you to know and remember? I want you to remember that Jesus *is* risen from the dead. I want you to remember that He is risen indeed. I want you to remember that we serve a risen and living Savior. I want you to know and remember that the resurrection really happened.

I want you to know that Jesus came and lived and taught and healed and suffered and died for you. I want you to know that God loves sinners, that Jesus died for sinners, and that He did everything necessary for your salvation and mine. I want you to remember that Christianity is spelled D-O-N-E. Jesus has done it all. There is nothing left for you or me to do but to believe the gospel and receive Him as Savior and Lord of your life.

I want you to know and remember that grace is the most beautiful word there is in any language.

I want you to remember that God loves failures. He delights in giving us second chances when we have blown it. I want you to remember that His grace abounds to sinners and is sufficient for every need in every situation. I want you to know that whatever you have done or failed to do, Jesus has a place for you and a mission for you in the family of His church.

I want you to remember that nothing in the whole universe, including death, can ever separate you from the love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. In His death and resurrection, Jesus did not "cancel" death; He conquered it.

I want you to remember this, too: Jesus' word to Peter in verse 19 is also His word to you and me. He says: "Follow me." As a beneficiary of God's grace; as one to whom God has given a second chance and a third chance and more; as one whose many sins have been forgiven and

whose life has been changed by the gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16); Jesus calls you to follow Him, to serve His purposes in this world in faith and love, with heart and soul and mind and strength. In following Him, Jesus wants you to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, for this is the chief end and purpose of life.

These are the things I want you to know and remember. Lord, let it be so in us. Now and always. Amen.