

# Gone Fishing

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## Gone Fishing

When I was growing up, whenever my dad would put his coat on and one of us would ask where he was going, inevitably, he'd say, "fishin'." This, despite the fact that he really didn't fish. It was his way of evading us, being silly, and, making sure we didn't ask to come along. Of course, as we got older, we caught on to his little game, so when we would ask if we could come along, he'd add disincentives, like "okay, but you'll have to bait the hook," or "you'll have to clean whatever we catch."

When we catch up with Peter and the disciples today, they've gone fishing. This isn't uncommon in the Bible. You're probably all familiar with the time, toward the beginning of the Gospels, where Jesus first calls the disciples while they are fishing and tells them that, from now on, they're going to be fishing for people. Fishing is such a strong metaphor in the Gospels that many church ceilings are shaped to look like an overturned boat, and a common term for the church is "the barque of Peter," which means the boat of Peter. The church is a boat, helping us to navigate the waters of life, and we are all in this boat together.

But what's different about today's Gospel passage is when they're fishing. This passage comes after Easter, after the Resurrection. It's the end of the Gospel of John. And, most importantly, it comes after Peter denied Jesus three times.

Whenever I reflect on this passage, I think it's helpful to try to put ourselves in Peter's mindset. He had been following Jesus for a few years now. In fact, Peter had left his fishing business, in fact, he'd left everything to follow this teacher and preacher and healer who, while unconventional, was making a real difference in people's lives.

Peter didn't always get what Jesus was saying, but he was all-in. Peter had been up-close and personal in so much that Jesus had done, but then, during their Passover meal a few nights before, Jesus had said, in front of everybody, that Peter was going to deny him three times. What the heck, Jesus. Really? In front of everybody?

At the time, Peter had felt indignant, annoyed at what he perceives as a slight by Jesus. I have to imagine that at the Last Supper, Peter is thinking, "Doesn't Jesus know me at all? Doesn't he realize my loyalty? Does he really think so little of me? What kind of a fair-weather friend does he think I am?" Peter may have even thought, "I don't have to take this. If he really does think this little of me, maybe it's time to be done with him. Set out on my own."

So, looking back on how everything went so horrifically sideways later that night, we have to imagine that Peter was a wreck. Not only had Peter denied knowing Jesus and being his disciple, none of them had been able to stop him from being killed. They couldn't stop Pilate and Herod and the sadistic, manipulative dance they were playing in which the Jewish people were mere pawns in their power game. They couldn't stop the crowd and popular opinion. They couldn't stop the folks who were so hungry for violence that they made a spectacle of killing him and called it "the system."

## Regrets

Whenever we reflect on this passage, it's important to get into that headspace. When we catch up with Peter today, he's back on the Sea of Tiberias, back doing what he did before Jesus.

Have you ever tried to go back? Young adults often have a pretty rocky time when they move back home for summers during college. They've grown, had an experience of living on their own, but the folks back home still know them as who they had been before.

How about going back to a job? Going back to a relationship after a substantial time apart? The wisdom is that you can't go back home again, largely because you've changed, but also because home has changed (or it hasn't changed in the ways that drove you away to begin with, which, in some cases, is even worse).

And, it's especially hard to go back if the return isn't necessarily your idea. It's one thing to pull into town having made it, with a shiny car, a pile of degrees, a vibrant life. It's something else to slink back to what you had been doing because the chance you'd taken went so horribly, so publicly wrong.

I'm reading a book right now called *The Midnight Library*. Because I'm in the middle of it right now, I can't recommend it, but there's a scene that resonates so closely to Peter's experience.

In the book, the main character is struggling, mightily, to the point that she's contemplating suicide. Somehow, she finds her way to an alternate reality that is in between life and death, which, for her, is a library full of alternate endings. Each book is the story of her life if she had made a different decision, chosen a different path.

As she arrives in this library, the book she is given first is *The Book of Regrets*, which, as you can imagine, is heartbreaking for the reader, and yet, as someone who is depressed, it's all too familiar. She doesn't need a book of regrets; they're all rattling through her brain constantly.

I have to imagine that Peter, sitting out in that boat all night in the Sea of Tiberias, is flipping through his own Book of Regrets. Every wrong step, every missed opportunity, is staring back at him. Peter do you love me? And then this mysterious stranger tells him and his buddies to cast their nets off the other side. My guess is, Peter's still in a fog. "Yeah, sure, whatever."

I followed someone who told me to do that once. But then it works. Even better than it had the last time. Peter had been spiraling deep down into depression, and now this marvelous catch of fish becomes a net that catches him.

As the dawn breaks (a symbol we're meant to catch – that light will return, even when we're in our darkest hour), Jesus reminds Peter that he is more than his faults and failings, more than his regrets. By the time the disciples haul the nets in, Jesus has a charcoal fire going on the beach, and he feeds Peter. Peter, who had denied even knowing him. Peter, who hadn't been able to stop the miscarriage of justice. Peter, who couldn't even fish anymore. Peter, whose book of regrets was so heavy it was about to sink him, and he had just been thinking that drowning might be okay.

Jesus first attends to his physical needs. Eat a little something. Then, Jesus tells Peter that he knows him, at the core of who he is, and that core is love. Not denial. Not betrayal. Not the ways the system has done them, and everyone involved, wrong. Not any of the regrets. Jesus, in asking “Peter, do you love me?” is saying to Peter, “I know that who you are at the core of your being is more than the ways you’ve messed up. You ARE more than your mistakes, your sins, your failures. You are loving. You are loved. You are precious, and you are mine.” That Jesus gives Peter a choice here shouldn’t be lost on us, nor should the threefold love.

Healing, pulling up out of the tailspin of grief and depression, can’t be done by anyone else. Jesus invited Peter back into the land of the living, but it was just that, an invitation. It was up to Peter to accept. I will point out here, though, that God will keep on inviting, keep on drawing us to life, even though it’s up to us to accept the invitation.

That Jesus asks Peter if he loves him three times symbolizes a completeness. Just as Peter denied three times, he is invited to love three times. All of our missteps can be resolved, and it’s almost formulaic: with love and repair. You see, that’s what Jesus is doing when he says, “Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.” You’ve said you love me. You said it before. So now, let’s work on repair. Put your money where your mouth is; put your love into action. Show me that the love we have for one another is more than just words.

### **Conclusion**

Someone who is very dear to me is struggling with regrets right now, and I suspect that you all know folks who are struggling, too, whether it’s you or someone you care about, whether it’s over regrets or grief or some other trauma. To all of you, through this passage, God is inviting you into love, into healing, into hope. God is saying, “you mean so much more to me than your missteps, so much more than your brokenness, so much more than the ways things went wrong, even the things that were your fault.” It’s okay to go back to fishing for a while. It’s okay to go back home, go back to the familiar, live on autopilot for a while. Just know that when you’re ready, that abundant life that we talked about is still within your grasp. It’s always going to be within your grasp. Because I love you. And I know, at the core of who you are, that you love me. Alleluia! Thanks be to God.

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**Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26; John 21:1-19**  
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