

Series: "The Unfinished Business of Easter"  
#5: "The Unexpected Grace of the Empty Tomb"  
(Luke 5:1-11) John 21:1-19  
By John Gill

Have you ever experienced déjà vu? You know – that feeling that you had been to the same place, done the same thing, or had the same conversation before? Weird! Isn't it? It's enough to give you the willies – sort of a "twilight zone" experience. If you have experienced that feeling, you know what Yogi Berra meant when he quipped, "It's like déjà vu all over again!"

Peter must have had that feeling – BIG TIME! It's the same location (the Sea of Galilee, a lake called by several other names – Lake Gennesaret or Lake Tiberias); It's the same situation (fishing, and not catching anything); It's the same conversation (being called to follow Jesus). It's no wonder Peter recognizes Jesus – "It's like déjà vu all over again!"

Peter must have thought he was dreaming – but Peter's mind wasn't playing tricks on him. Jesus was no mirage – Jesus was really there!

You know, Peter may be my favorite disciple – Why? Because we can identify with him so easily. He had faith enough to walk on water, yet he sank because of doubt; He recognized Jesus as Messiah, and then misunderstood the kind of Messiah Jesus had come into the world to be; One minute Peter was given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, and in the next moment, Jesus called him "satan;" He was Jesus's "right hand man," but fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane just when Jesus needed him the most; He boldly declared his loyalty, and then turned around and denied he even knew Jesus – three times!

Isn't Peter just like us? - Bold and wishy-washy; Loyal and disloyal; Confident and blundering. Peter certainly wasn't, what you'd call, a "model disciple!"

I once read that the seventh largest uncut diamond in history was almost discarded as an ordinary rock. But thanks to the keen eye of an observant mine-worker – what had been determined to be worthless turned out to be priceless!

When Jesus looked at Peter, he recognized that Peter was a "diamond in the rough." All he needed was a little refinement and cultivation, and Peter would become a shining example of faith. Or as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: "A weed is a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered." Jesus looked on Peter's "weeds" and saw "flowers."

When Jesus had first called Peter, he saw through his imperfections to his potential. That's true for you and me, too. We have great potential, but so often, we are a great disappointment to Jesus. Yet, Jesus has chosen to call US, just as we are – warts and all. Isn't it wonderful that Jesus looks beyond our weaknesses to our potential – He sees the flowers yet to bloom on our weeds – the glistening diamond hidden within our lump of coal!

Despite everything, Peter wasn't a lost cause. And neither are you and I.

You know, Peter must have been emotionally drained: He had just experienced the roller-coaster events of Holy Week; the excited anticipation of Palm Sunday; the solemn Passover meal with Jesus; the tragic death of his friend and master; the despair of mourning on that sad Sabbath day; and the bewildering discovery of an empty tomb. It was a week full of mixed emotions: joy, fear, and confusion, that left Peter wondering – “What does it all mean?”

So, when it was all over, Peter turned to the other Disciples and announced, “I'm going fishing.” Now, just WHY he decides to go fishing, we're not told: Maybe he felt discouraged. After all, he had devoted three long years to following this Jesus – years that may now seem to have been wasted. So, now its time to pick up the pieces of his life where he had left off... Or, perhaps Peter decided to go home – not because he thought those three years with Jesus were wasted, but because he felt his mission had been completed. When he decided to leave his wife, his family, and his business to become a disciple, everyone in Capernaum must have thought he was crazy. But on Easter morning, when God raised Jesus from the dead, Peter's decision to follow Jesus was vindicated! But, now it's all over – “Mission Accomplished!” It was great while it lasted, but now, its back to the “real world.” In any case, Peter had decided to go back to his old, “pre-Jesus” life.

Now, we must not be too hard on Peter, or too quick to judge him. We do it, also – We pine for the old life, “pre-Jesus.” It's a natural reaction: When difficult periods in our lives pass, we try to pick up the pieces of our lives, don't' we? When change comes, changes that are hard to accept, we instinctively try to “get back to our roots;” When our future seems uncertain, its normal for us to “cling tighter to what's familiar.”

But, whenever we try that, we discover – one of the timeless truths of life: “You can't ever go back.” Living in the past is like driving while looking in the rear-view-mirror.

Peter found out he couldn't go back – and neither can we. In our Sermon Series on the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus, you may have already picked up that there is a common theme that runs throughout all of these stories. And this is it: “An encounter with Christ changes you forever. Once you have been with Jesus, your life can never be the same again.’

You know, there are lots of people who have been “saved” at revivals, only to revert back to their “pre-Jesus” life within a few days. At a prayer meeting at his church, a man stood up and prayed, “Lord, clean all the cobwebs out of my life.” Just then, a little girl chimed in, “Lord, don't clean out the cobwebs – just kill the spider!”

Jesus appeared to Peter by the Sea to remind him (and us) that we can never go back again.

This wasn't the first time since Easter morning that the Risen Christ had appeared to the Disciples (our scripture lessons reminded us of that). Earlier, Jesus had appeared in Jerusalem in the Upper Room. That experience must have caused conflicting emotions within Peter – Joy

and Guilt. Joy, that his Lord was alive! Guilt, that Peter had denied him when the chips were down. (Maybe even a little Fear, wondering if Jesus might have returned to pass judgement on him.)

But, Jesus is the Master of Mercy – always forgiving – always gracious!

So, Jesus appears a second time to Peter – this time, by the sea – and he asks Peter point-blank: “Peter, do you love me?” He asks it THREE times!

Do you think Jesus was hard of hearing? Why THREE times? Peter had given a three-fold denial – therefore he needed a three-fold restoration so he could experience the forgiveness and love of Christ.

Jesus didn’t need to hear it. Peter needed to say it! Peter needed to purge his past – to be released from the dark prison of his guilt. That day by the Sea, Jesus gave him the opportunity to do just that – to experience the liberation of being forgiven!

One man was telling another about the arguments he was having with his wife. He said, “She always gets HISTORICAL.” “You mean “HYSTERICAL,” his friend corrected. “No, I mean historical. Every time we argue, she drags up everything from the past and uses it against me.”

Not so with Jesus. That day, he not only “forgave” Peter, but he also “forgot” the past. He forgave and forgot, so that Peter could, too.

The Good News of this story is that Jesus offers us a chance to start over, as well. He loves us in spite of our rebellion, and he is willing to forgive us, too.

Someone once asked Abraham Lincoln how he would treat Southerners after the war. His response – “I will treat them as though they had never been away.”

Like Peter, you and I “deny” Jesus every day, and we feel guilty. But Jesus gives us the chance to declare our love for him, purge our guilt, and experience forgiveness and reconciliation!

Peter knew that Jesus loved him “just as if he had never been away.” And, if our text ended there, we would have felt that our story was properly concluded. But there’s more. Once he was forgiven and restored, Jesus gave Peter a task to do.

Jesus is alive – Peter is restored; but that’s not enough. Peter had THOUGHT the empty tomb was the END of the story. But the story isn’t over with Easter! We can’t just go back to the old life! Easter isn’t the ending – it’s just the beginning!

In Peter’s first encounter with Jesus by the Sea (our lesson from Luke’s Gospel), Jesus had called Peter to become a “disciple” – a “student.” But Jesus now calls Peter a second time – this time to become an “apostle” – “one sent on a mission.” He says – again three times – “Feed my

Sheep.” This resurrection-encounter with Jesus was both Peter’s “graduation exercise,” and his “commissioning for ministry!” Up ‘til then, Peter had been in training – an apprentice, and now he was being called upon to put all he had learned into action.

And, isn’t that the way it is with the Christian life? Confessing “Jesus as Lord” and “Being Saved” isn’t the finish-line of our spiritual race, it’s the starting block!” Our salvation is only the FIRST step in the Christian life – salvation is meant to lead to service!

One of my favorite Broadway musicals is “My Fair Lady.” In one scene, Elisa sings, “Don’t talk of love – SHOW ME!”

That’s what Jesus was trying to say to Peter: “Peter, words are cheap! Don’t just talk of love – show me! Feed my sheep!”

A mother took her son to visit in the home of their Roman Catholic priest. Later, the boy asked his mom: “Why were there no toys?” She explained that there were no children. “Well, why are there no children?” Mom explained that the priest wasn’t married. “Why isn’t he married?” She replied, “Because he’s doing God’s work.” Then, after a thoughtful pause, the boy asked, “Why can’t God do his OWN work, Mommy?”

A fair question. Why CAN’T God do his own work? Because he is counting on you and me to do it!

Jesus was giving Peter HIS work to do – God’s work. It’s amazing that Jesus entrusted Peter – impetuous, vacillating, disloyal Peter – with an awesome responsibility: to care for his flock in his absence!

Our tasks in ministry may not seem as big as Peter’s, but they are every bit as important. Jesus still has work to do – and he is calling on US to do it! He’s saying to us, “Don’t just talk of love – SHOW ME!”

Déjà vu? It was exactly the same, but profoundly DIFFERENT! This remarkable experience was intended to remind Peter of his first call, and to renew it. In his first call, Peter had felt the joy of being chosen: “JESUS WANTS ME.” His second call was even more remarkable, because Peter came to realize that – in spite of it all – in spite of my failures – in spite of my screw-ups, JESUS STILL WANTS ME!”

My friends, we all need to be reminded of our first call – of the joy and excitement of being “chosen.” But the Unexpected Grace of the Empty Tomb is that, no matter how much you may have back-slid and tried to go back to your “pre-Jesus” life, Jesus is ready to restore you, and to re-commission you for ministry - - -

To say to you once more, “Follow me.”

