

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Failure Is Not Final

John 21:1-19

In the verse right before the beginning of today's text, John states explicitly what has been an implicit, driving concern for him throughout his Gospel, namely, that his readers and hearers come to faith in Jesus. He writes, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (v. 31).

What a climactic summary of John's reason for writing. Sounds like he's ready to give the altar call. Summon the music leader and open your hymnals. What a fitting place this would be for John's Gospel to end. But it doesn't. Instead, John begins another chapter. Why? Or as one writer has put it, "What kind of encore can you play after you have risen from the dead? What sort of finale would add anything to the most final of acts?"¹

As it turns out, there's more to this story. It all begins with a failed fishing expedition. Peter and some of the other disciples get into a boat and go out onto the lake that had been the source of their livelihood. This was familiar territory. It was what they had known, and done, for so much of their lives. After all that had recently happened, particularly their encounters with Jesus, maybe the disciples sought some space outside of Jerusalem where they could clear their minds or process the whole experience of Jesus' suffering, death, and appearances to them. Maybe they were still working through a sense of bewilderment and fear, mixed with a measure of aimlessness. What's next in our lives? Where do we go from here? Maybe we should return to doing what we spent most of our time doing before we met Jesus.

So the disciples return to a familiar spot and familiar work. But this time their work produces nothing. After a night of fishing, all they have to show for their effort is an empty net. But now the darkness is starting to give way to the dawn. There's light on the horizon, enough for them to make out a stranger standing on the shore. They must have been a little skeptical when someone on dry land starts giving them advice about where to cast their net. But seeing as their own plan has turned out to be such a lost cause, the disciples decide to give it a try. And suddenly, they haul in more than they can handle. Once again, Jesus has shown up, overcoming their failure with his fullness.

This certainly wasn't the first time. Recall the miraculous sign that Jesus performed early in his ministry, turning water into an abundance of good wine (2:1-11). There was also the feeding miracle (6:1-14), where Jesus' gifts provided not only enough but more than enough. And now here, at the conclusion of John's Gospel, the glory of God shows up in Jesus' deed of abundance. "It is the Lord!" (v. 7). Where the Lord is, there is grace that exceeds all human effort and redeems all human failing.

Maybe that's part of why the disciples struggled through the uncertainties of where their lives were headed after the resurrection. We joyously and routinely declare, "Good news, Jesus is alive!" But for those first disciples, who had scattered into the darkness when the time came for Jesus' suffering and death, what about the risks of a resurrected Jesus. Yes,

God has brought him back from the dead. But back for what? Back for revenge? Back to settle the score with those who betrayed him, denied him, or abandoned him? Back to pronounce condemnation on those who broke their promises of loyalty to him?

When Peter and the other disciples came ashore, Jesus was waiting, not with retribution but with restoration. A charcoal fire was burning. The same term appears earlier in the story of Peter standing next to a charcoal fire, with bystanders claiming they recognize him as one of Jesus' disciples. Three times Peter denies knowing Jesus. He saves himself at the expense of his Lord. Now, his Lord has come back, and Peter meets him at another charcoal fire. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" (21:15-17). Wesley Hill has captured the significance of this scene when he says: "Jesus rewrites Peter's story of cowardice and faithlessness in that moment on the shore of the lake. With a few gestures and a handful of words, he says, 'Far more can be mended than you know.' That is the meaning and message of Easter."²

As I emphasized last Sunday, Easter is not only a once-a-year event but also a weekly reality, with every Sunday, every Lord's Day, being a "little Easter." This "little Easter" that we celebrate every Sunday frames all the other days in between, as we live further into the reconciling love of Christ and grow into his relentless claim upon our lives. The more we reflect on Easter, the more clearly we see how the empty net of human failure can get filled to overflowing by the life-giving power of the living Lord.

What a wonder that the Savior of the world joins himself to frail, failing beings like us. We all have our personal histories of failing to live up to our commitments and promises to Christ. We all have those times and experiences when we look at our lives and wonder, "How did I say that, do that, or think that, and still claim to be a follower of Jesus?" The truth is, rather than giving our lives more fully to him, each of us still struggles, day in and day out, with holding onto our lives, trying to define ourselves or prove ourselves or redeem ourselves apart from the grace of God in Jesus.

Yet he still shows up with an invitation to come be with him, to know and experience the forgiveness that is greater than our worst failures. To be claimed anew and brought back into his ongoing purpose in the world. Again, what a wonder that we have the kind of Savior who joins his eternal life to our frail and faltering lives, making more out of us than we can ever be or accomplish on our own.

In reflecting on the death of Pope Francis, people from around the world have converged in their view of him as an example of humility and a model of solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. Francis placed great emphasis on the importance of being close to the people. He dedicated himself to the less fortunate. He washed the feet of prisoners. He often opted to ride in an open-air car instead of the bullet-proof pope mobile. It's no wonder that he was often referred to as the "People's Pope."

I was struck by a story shared by Alejandro Rodríguez, president of Youth With a Mission (YWAM) Argentina, who knew and had conversations with Pope Francis. According to one writer, Rodríguez once "told the future pope that real shepherds live with their sheep and that they're around them so much they have the same smell as their flock." "A pastor," Rodríguez remembers saying, "must have the odor of the sheep."³ That metaphor made such an impression on Pope Francis that he used it years later in a homily. We also see how it played itself out in the way he went about serving as pope, shepherding the worldwide flock under his care.

In John's Gospel, one of the memorable images of Jesus' relationship with his followers is that of a shepherd with his sheep (10:1-21). In today's text, Jesus uses similar imagery in his conversation with Peter. Each time that Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" and Peter

answers “Yes,” Jesus gives him specific things to do in caring for Jesus’ flock. “Feed my lambs” (v. 15). “Take care of my sheep” (v. 16). “Feed my sheep” (v. 17). Notice how Jesus takes Peter’s failure and transforms it into faithful and fruitful service for the sake of God’s love in the world.

J. R. Briggs is a pastor who went through a painful season of ministry during which he experienced betrayal, hurt, grief, loss, disillusionment, and a sense of hopelessness. He lived with gripping anxiety about whether he would make it through this period of failure. But through the grace God and the faithful presence of others, Briggs came to experience a new freedom in Christ, a new sense of identity and worth grounded in Christ’s self-giving through the cross.

Reflecting on how God brought him through this season of failure and into a new season of fruitfulness, Briggs describes a Japanese form of art called wabi-sabi. He writes:

According to Japanese legend, a young man named Sen no Rikyu sought to learn the elaborate set of customs known as the “Way of Tea.” He went to tea master Takeno Joo, who tested the younger man by asking him to tend the garden. Rikyu cleaned up debris and raked the ground until it was perfect, and the garden immaculate. Before presenting his work to the master, he shook a cherry tree, causing a few flowers to fall onto the ground. To this day, the Japanese revere Rikyu as one who understood to his very core wabi-sabi. Emerging in the fifteenth century as a reaction to the prevailing aesthetic of lavishness, ornamentation, and rich materials, wabi-sabi is the art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in earthiness, of revering authenticity above all.

When a white pottery bowl breaks, for example, one might glue it back together with white lacquer to disguise the breaks, making it look as new and complete as possible. But in the East the bowl might be glued back together with lacquer sprinkled with gold to highlight the cracks and imperfections. Japanese culture sees the aesthetic value of imperfection in wabi-sabi just as much as the Greeks valued perfection in their art. Wabi-sabi is seen as beautiful because it is imperfect and broken. The gospel is like spiritual wabi-sabi. It is the story of how God redeems imperfect, broken people and uses them to bless a fractured world.⁴

In his Easter evening appearance to his disciples, Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). Jesus sends his forgiven followers into the world, to proclaim and practice our reconciliation with him and with one another. Our Lord’s commission doesn’t require perfection; It requires faith in him and his capacity to work in and through frail, fallen human beings. I like the way Mandy Smith puts it when she says, “God doesn’t need our perfection. He already has his own. He chooses us because we offer something different—humanity.”⁵

The living Jesus helped Peter and the rest of his all too human disciples see that because of the cross and resurrection, failure is not final. Our fracturedness and brokenness are not the end of the story. As I stressed in last Sunday’s sermon, we need to let Easter continue to sink in more deeply. And as we do so, we realize, more and more, that Jesus, in his redeeming love, has united himself with us in such a deep and personal way that our failings and our frailty become the occasion for his power and glory to be revealed, and his presence to be made known to the world.

¹ James G. Somerville, “Encore,” *Christian Century* (April 15, 1998) 395.

² Wesley Hill, *Easter: The Season of the Resurrection of Jesus*. The Fullness of Time (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2025) Kindle edition.

³ Franco Iacomini, “Died: Pope Francis, Friend to Evangelicals.” *Christianity Today*. April 21, 2025. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/04/pope-francis-dies-evangelicals/> (April 23, 2025).

⁴ J. R. Briggs, “Transforming Failure.” *Leadership Journal* (April 2014).

⁵ Mandy Smith, *The Vulnerable Pastor: How Human Limitations Empower Our Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015) Kindle edition.