

***May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be pleasing to you, Oh Lord. Amen.***

During the Easter season, we joyfully proclaim in our services: "Alleluia. Christ is risen." "He is risen indeed. Alleluia!" But what does this proclamation truly mean for us today? Is the resurrection only about forgiven sins and us going to heaven? Or does the risen Christ impact us beyond that?

Today's reading from John's gospel takes us on that journey, and I want to focus on Peter's perspective—because his story teaches us how the truth of the resurrection shapes and deepens our faith.

After the resurrection, Jesus instructed the disciples to wait for Him in Galilee. This is where John's gospel picks up the story, at the shores of the Sea of Tiberias (otherwise known as the Sea of Galilee). Galilee was a place of deep significance because most of them had met Jesus in Galilee for the first time. For Peter, Andrew, James, and John, Galilee is where it all began. All four of them were professional fishermen before Jesus had called them to follow Him. The Sea of Galilee was their place of work, and they had led a very different life before they met Jesus.

The gospel tells us that while they were waiting in Galilee, Peter stood up and decided to go fishing. Peter was a natural leader, and the others joined him. Some believe that Peter was wrong to go fishing, seeing it as a return to his old life. Others believe Peter was simply being wise and practical, since the scandal of Jesus' death on the cross had likely ended all their sources of support. In any case, the disciples didn't realize their Lord was watching them as they carried out this simple, ordinary task of everyday life.

Jesus, compassionate as ever, called to them from shore and told them where to cast the net—and they caught 153 fish. This is when John realized: "It is the Lord!" Quickly, Peter jumped into the water and swam toward Jesus. There is no doubt that Peter truly loved Jesus. But despite his deep love for the Lord, Peter had failed to stand by Jesus during the last hours of His life. Peter's hurried response to be near Jesus, by immediately dropping what he was doing and jumping into the water, probably expressed the deep regret he still felt for his actions and words.

When the disciples arrived, Jesus had already prepared breakfast—a charcoal fire, fish, and bread - all waiting for them. Before they brought anything, Jesus had already provided. Then, Jesus asked them to bring some of the fish they had just caught. Peter, strong as he was, hauled the net ashore—full of large fish, 153 of them. They had a beautiful breakfast on the shore of the Sea.

Finally, Jesus turned to Peter—but He called him by his former name: Simon. You might recall that Simon was his name until Jesus renamed him Peter, saying, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus chose Peter and gave him a mission long before the cross—and long before Peter's failure. But now the question hung in the air: Did Peter's failure undo it all? Did it disqualify him?

Yet even after his failure, Peter was about to discover that the risen Christ wasn't finished with him. Jesus addressed him, saying, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" It has been widely debated what Jesus meant by "these." He may have been referring to the fish and Peter's old life as a fisherman. However, it's more likely Jesus was prompting Peter to revisit his earlier claim that he loved Jesus more than the other disciples. As you might recall, before Peter denied Jesus three times, he had confidently insisted, "Even if all fall away, I never will!" (Mark 14:29). So now, Jesus simply wanted to hear from Peter whether he still held that proud estimation of his love and devotion.

Three times Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" and three times Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, I love you. You know that I love you." But something subtle is happening here. Many Bible scholars note that in the original text, Jesus and Peter use two different Greek words for "love": Jesus uses "agape," meaning selfless, unconditional love, while Peter responds with "phileo," meaning affectionate, brotherly love.

The first two times, Jesus asks if Peter loves Him with agape—a deep, unconditional, and selfless love. Peter responds with phileo: "I love you as a friend." The third time, however, Jesus shifts and uses the word "phileo," aligning with Peter's previous responses. He was meeting Peter where he was emotionally and spiritually.

Now Peter was hurt, because by the third time, he must have realized that Jesus was gently confronting his three denials—and meeting him in his imperfect love. However, by using Peter's word, Jesus was also showing compassion, as if saying: "I accept your love, Peter. I know where you are—and I'll meet you there."

There is much for us to learn from this conversation.

Firstly, Peter's use of the word "phileo" wasn't distance—it was humility. Once bold in proclaiming devotion, he now admitted, "I care deeply for you, Lord, but I won't claim more love than I can truthfully live up to." Peter accepted now that he could fail. This was something incredibly hard for someone like Peter—the strong fisherman, the natural leader and passionate action-taker—to finally be willing to recognize his weakness and estimate his spiritual state truthfully.

The more marvellous lesson about this conversation is, however, that Jesus, knowing all this, still entrusted Peter with the care of His people, saying, "Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs." By this, Jesus was showing that honesty is enough for His grace to begin its work. This public restoration made clear: Peter was still chosen to help build Christ's Church.

And sure enough, Peter lived up to his calling. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read how Peter preached and 3,000 people were added to the Church at Pentecost. Peter also continued to play a crucial role within the Church later on—for example, by confirming that the Good News about Jesus must be proclaimed not just to the Jews but also to the Gentiles.

However, Peter still wasn't perfect. In Galatians chapter 2, the apostle Paul confronts Peter for withdrawing from Gentile believers out of fear of criticism by the Jews. So even after the resurrection, after Pentecost, after becoming the rock of the Church, Peter still got things wrong. But in that particular instance, Paul held him accountable—truthfully and with brotherly love.

That's what real Christian community looks like: not perfection, but encouragement, commitment to truth, and genuine love.

We need that too. We need fellow believers who genuinely care for us—not just those who approach us when there's a task to be done in church, but those who sincerely want to be part of

our lives beyond the walls of this building. We need Christian friends who cheer us on in our victories, who encourage us, and who hold us accountable with gentleness and love.

This is what Peter's story reminds us about: if genuine love and correction don't go hand in hand, we risk wounding and crushing the very people we're called to strengthen. So, whenever we feel tempted to criticize or make judgments, we must remember that Jesus didn't choose Peter because he was flawless, but because he was willing—to love, fail, be humbled, and follow again. Peter had a teachable heart, and that's what the risen Christ calls us to. Not a self-righteous and boastful estimation of our love and devotion to Christ, but a life rooted in humbleness, because it takes humility to remember that we have experienced restoration and love. Only this kind of restoration and love can produce a tender heart that, in turn, is fully willing to extend mercy and grace to others.

So may we, like Peter, count on His mercy, love Him honestly, follow Him faithfully, and feed His sheep. May we genuinely love each other in truth, compassion, and grace, as we pray for our Father's help to build up His Church—a Church truly led by the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Possible questions for house groups:

Peter's Restoration and Spiritual Growth

1. **Honest Love vs. Ideal Love:** Peter humbly admits a less-than-perfect love for Jesus. How does his honesty challenge our own expressions of faith and devotion? Jesus adjusted His language to match Peter's emotional state. What does this tell us about the patience and gentleness of Christ? How can we learn to meet others "where they are" in their faith journey?
2. **Restoration as a Public Witness:** Why do you think Jesus restored Peter in front of the others? How can we create communities where people are built up, not shamed, after failure?
3. **Feeding His Sheep Today:** Peter was still called to "feed Jesus' sheep" even after his mistakes. What does this say about God's love despite our flaws? How do we discern and stay faithful to our own calling? What does "feed my sheep" mean for us practically in our context?

Christian Community and Real Friendship

1. **Real love in Practice and Accountability:** How can we at St. Ursula's be more encouraging, truthful, and loving with each other? Do we sometimes disguise criticism or cynicism as "speaking the truth" or "holding people accountable"? Do we justify our reactions to differences, rather than recognizing a deeper systemic issue? How can we hold each other accountable in love and grace?
2. **Beyond Sunday Conversations and Barreirs:** When was the last time you had a meaningful conversation with someone from church outside of a Sunday service? How can we create more of those moments? Are there safe spaces in your church where people freely share both joys and struggles? What hinders true connections and honesty? How can we build trust? What holds you back from opening up? How can the church support deeper, more honest relationships?
3. **Superficial vs. Spiritual Friendship:** Share a time when another Christian took a genuine interest in you. What did that mean for your faith or your sense of community? How do we notice when our church relationships are becoming too shallow? How do we truly see people who are rather shy or do not open up quickly and how can we make them feel more seen and love?