

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Easter 3

May 1, 2022

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

Follow me!

¹⁵When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I care about you.” Jesus told him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶A second time Jesus asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said, “Yes, Lord, you know that I care about you.”

Jesus told him, “Be a shepherd for my sheep.” ¹⁷He asked him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you care about me?” Peter was grieved because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you care about me?” He answered, “Lord, you know all things. You know that I care about you.”

“Feed my sheep,” Jesus said. ¹⁸“Amen, Amen, I tell you: When you were young, you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will tie you and carry you where you do not want to go.”

¹⁹Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, he told him, “Follow me.”

—John 21:15-19

With one look Jesus shook Peter out of his perjury.

“I swear I don’t know the man!” Peter said in the courtyard of the high priest. Jesus had warned him. “Satan has asked to sift you like wheat,” he cautioned Peter. “Before the rooster crows you will deny me three times.” But no, Peter was ready to lay down his life for Jesus. He was a bold disciple. He was confident. So he found himself in a place he should not have been, in the company of people he should not have been with, people who grilled him about his relationship with Jesus, under pressure that Peter could not withstand.

So he lied. He swore. He denied. Three times. Then the rooster crowed. And Jesus turned and looked at Peter. And Peter ran, away from the fire, away from the palace of the high priest, and he wept bitterly.

What was in that look that Jesus directed at Peter? Was it a look of utter disappointment, immense pain, deepest sadness that one of his own disciples, one of his closest friends, could so vehemently turn his back on him? Perhaps. Or was it a look of the most tender love, kindness and compassion, as even then Jesus wanted Peter to know how dearly he still loved his foul-mouthed friend? We don’t know; we can only speculate. But as Peter grieved that early morning and wept bitter tears, as Jesus hung on the cross that Friday, died and was buried, and as strange, confusing, exciting news began trickling back from the empty tomb on Easter morning, we can only imagine the heavy burden that Peter still carried on his heart. Even as the joy of Jesus’ resurrection was confirmed and repeated, and it was so wonderfully obvious that Jesus was really alive, there was still this lingering issue hanging out there—Peter’s behavior by the fire that night and the words that had come from his lips. Now it was time for Jesus in this encounter with Peter to deal with the proverbial elephant in the room.

After another miraculous catch of fish, the risen Jesus had breakfast with his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It wasn’t far from the place he had first called Peter. Three years earlier, just up the shore of the lake, Jesus had said these same words to Peter: “Follow me.” This time, though, before the risen Lord said those words again, he took Peter for a walk by the lake, and he asked him a hard question. “Peter, do you love me?” According to John’s Gospel the word Jesus used was intense: ἀγαπᾷς με (*agapás me*) more than these? Do you love me intensely, selflessly, committedly, unconditionally more than you care about what these others might think? Peter’s response was less emphatic; he used a different Greek word when he replied, “Yes, Lord, you know that I care about you” (φιλῶ σε – *philó se*). Then Jesus asked Peter again and received the same response. Then he asked Peter a third time. A third time! And the memories came flooding back from that night in the courtyard, where Peter had been asked three times about Jesus and three times had denied his Lord. Peter was cut, wounded, hurt by Jesus’ question. And the third time Jesus didn’t even ask intensely. He didn’t ask if Peter loved him selflessly, committedly, unconditionally. He just asked, “Φιλεῖς με (*phileis me*)?” He just asked if Peter even cared about him and considered him a friend. And Peter could only appeal to the perfect knowledge of Jesus and say, “Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you.” And then Jesus said again to Peter those two words: “Follow me.”

“Follow me!” those are the sweetest words any human being can ever hear, the invitation to be a follower of Jesus. Three years earlier Peter had left everything on the shore of the lake and followed Jesus. He left his trade as a fisherman to follow Jesus and start fishing for people. He followed Jesus because he wanted to be part of the Kingdom of God—although he may not have quite understood what that meant. He followed Jesus, and he saw amazing things. At Jesus’ side Peter saw lepers cleansed, the blind given sight, the lame jumping and dancing for

joy, demons fleeing with a shriek, even the dead raised to life. Peter himself had walked on water—before he started to sink. Peter himself was commended for his faith—before Jesus told him, “Get behind me, Satan!” Peter followed Jesus because he knew he was the Christ, the Son of the living God. He followed Jesus because Jesus had the words of eternal life, and there was nowhere else to go except to follow Jesus. That was all before. Before the denial, before Jesus’ death, and before Peter saw Jesus risen and glorified.

Now Jesus called him again, “Follow me!” He reinstated him as an apostle. Unlike Judas, who was lost forever, Peter was rejoined to the Twelve and given this sweet task: “Feed my sheep! Feed my lambs! Feed my sheep!” Jesus gave Peter responsibility for feeding his flock, to be a shepherd under the Good Shepherd, to be a caretaker of souls. Peter was once again called to preach the Word, to comfort the hurting with the salve of God’s grace, to minister to the sick and dying and to point them to heaven. Any pastor knows the blessed privilege of feeding Jesus’ sheep the Bread of Life. Any teacher knows the privilege of leading the lambs of Jesus’ flock to the green pastures and quiet waters of Jesus’ love. It’s the privilege of serving in Jesus’ Name.

“Follow me!” With those two words the Savior taught Peter a very important lesson: No matter how great our sin, Jesus’ love for sinners is infinitely greater. Peter had done a horrible thing—repeatedly! —in denying Jesus. But the blood that flowed from Jesus’ wounds as he died on the cross washed all of Peter’s guilt away. The burden of Peter’s sin weighed heavily on his heart; an issue that had to be dealt with. But Jesus lifted the burden and forgave him his sin and let him know exactly where he stood with Jesus when he said, “Follow me!” The sin was gone, the guilt was removed, the denial was forgiven and forgotten along with all Peter’s other sins, along with the sin of the world. Reconciliation and peace with God assured by Jesus’ words, “Follow me!”

“Follow me!” Peter heard those words along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and he did follow Jesus. He preached the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the Name of the risen Lord Jesus in Judea and Samaria and Galilee and across many provinces of the Roman Empire. Finally Peter followed Jesus to his own death, a martyr’s death in Rome. Peter also was crucified, but because he did not consider himself worthy to be crucified in the same way as his Lord, he was crucified upside down. He followed Jesus and entered heaven.

“Follow me!” Jesus extended that same sweet invitation to be his disciple to you when he washed you in the water of Holy Baptism, placed his name upon you, and called you to be his disciple. He wrote your name in the Book of Life that day when you were brought to the baptismal font, and he laid on you the greatest privilege that any human being could ever receive, the privilege of being a disciple of Jesus. Since that day you and I have sinned many times. We’ve wandered off the path. We’ve chased after the siren song of this world’s temptations and pleasures. We’ve followed our own sinful desires. We’ve grieved our Savior with our sins. But it still holds true that Jesus’ love is bigger than our sin, no matter how grievous it may be. And every time you hear the word of absolution, every time you taste Jesus’ forgiveness in the Lord’s Supper, every time the voice of Jesus calls you and me back from our sin and back into his fold, it’s as if we hear again Jesus’ beautiful invitation. And each of us can say, “My sins are forgiven! I am at peace with God! I am a follower of Jesus, a disciple of my Savior, and that is the most wonderful thing I can be called to be. And it’s all because Jesus himself said, “Follow me!” Amen.