I was just thinking when we were singing that song “You came from heaven to earth to show the way, from the earth to the cross my debt to pay.”

And when my son, who I told you about yesterday, who asked the question about the pilot on the airplane, used to sing that song when he was a little boy. He didn’t really understand the words, and he used to sing, “You came from heaven to earth to save the cross, how many times will You have to tell me off?”

(That was more his concept of his mother than of God actually, but anyway.)

I think that’s how many of us see God – we just think God is waiting to tell us off.

And we looked in Scripture at the first time Peter encountered Jesus on this shoreline – not the first time he encountered Him, but the first time he encountered Him on the shoreline.

And this morning we are going to look at the last time he encountered Him on the shoreline. And an awful lot had happened between these two encounters. And I am sure, in Peter’s heart, he had the terrible feeling that he was in for a big telling off.

But that’s not the way God works. And if that’s how you see God, I pray that this morning God will completely eradicate that view of Himself from your mind and from your heart.

And if you were brought up with a very strict domineering father, then that might be the way you see God. But God needs to re-wire us to show us that we are welcome, not for a big telling off.

So we are going to be in John Chapter 21. And this is a beautiful chapter of reunion and restoration.

All of us fail and not everybody comes back from failure because some believe that failure is final. And if I was going to give a title to this morning, I would not just simply call it “Coming Back From Failure” but I would call it “Moving Beyond Failure.” Because it is one thing to come back, it’s another thing to get back on track and begin again.

And failure is not final with God. Failure is inevitable. Failure is actually essential for us to become who God wants us to be. If we are going to come to
the end of ourselves, then it is going to be through failure. And the longer we fight that and say, “Oh, I don’t fail” and “I’ll never fail”, the longer we live away from that broken place where God can actually get hold of us and use us.

When we come to the end of our resources we realize, as Major Thomas said,

“I can’t and You never said I could; You can and You always said You would.”

It’s a great relief to realize I can’t and where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.

A road to failure is paved with good intentions. We don’t usually set off to be deliberately mean or bad; we just fail along the way because that’s who we are. And at the end of this road, with maybe the greatest intentions, we meet God’s grace.

And failure leads us to the beautiful discovery that when we are faithless, He is faithful.

And Peter discovered that truth, not because somebody taught it to him or because somebody told it to him, but because he actually experienced failure and therefore he experienced restoration.

And Peter’s failed many, many times. In between these two incidents on the shoreline, there is a whole catalogue of failures in Peter’s life. And we can all relate to these failures.

Peter failed at the beginning to humble himself. Matthew 26:33:

“Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will,” said Peter.

(“I’m Your man; You can count on me.”)

Well, Jesus couldn’t count on Peter. And from that statement on there were a whole list of failures in Peter’s life.

When Jesus approached Peter with a towel and a basin and asked him to put his feet in the water, Peter said, “No.” He failed to receive the washing of Christ. And if we are ever going to walk with Christ, we are going to have to continue to receive His washing.

And when Peter resisted His washing, Jesus said to him, “Unless I wash you, you have no part in Me.” Very humbling experience for Peter.
Many of us think ministry is all about us kneeling before Christ, but it is also all about Christ kneeling before us – the Son of Man serving and washing us. And He continues to come close and wash us. “Unless I wash you, you have no part in Me.”

He didn’t want to be washed, he didn’t want to humble himself; he was the man.

But of course he then failed in a huge way in the Garden of Gethsemane. He failed to pray (have you been there?) because he was too tired.

Jesus was about to step into the most agonizing part of His life on earth and Peter wasn’t there for Him. He was sleeping with his friends, some of the other disciples.

And sometimes in our attempt to be sincere, we get it so wrong. And he sincerely wanted to be there for Jesus, but he wasn’t able to be. He wasn’t humanly able to be. And his humanness is shown in his tiredness.

And Peter, like many of us, had underestimated the severity of the battle that lay ahead of him, the battle that he was being drawn into with Jesus, the nastiness and the severity of the devil’s attacks on his life.

He had underestimated Jesus’ knowledge of him and his knowledge of the situation, his knowledge of what was coming, the pressures that were facing them.

“You will deny Me”, Jesus said.

And Peter said, “No, I won’t. You’re wrong. I’ll follow You to prison. I will never deny You.”

So while he was underestimating the attack, he was overestimating his courage and ability to face the attack.

And he underestimated how vital prayer is. This is not a battle – human battle. This is against principalities and powers.

And if you have a prayerless life, you have a powerless life, without a doubt.

And when he failed to pray, it triggered off more failures in his life, as it always does. In the Garden of Gethsemane, because Peter slept and didn’t pray, when the soldiers came, he wasn’t prepared.

Many of us are not prepared for the things that come into our lives simply because we are not living in a prayerful place.
So the soldiers arrive and head towards the one he loves, the one he is following and the one he has said he will just live for and not let down.

And what’s Peter’s reaction? He has not prayed; he has been asleep all night. So he actually lashes out and lops off one of the ears of the soldiers.

Is that what you do when you don’t pray? Maybe you don’t lop off peoples’ ears, but you lash out in anger. And I can lash out in anger when I don’t live in a prayerful place.

He lashes out and lops off Malchus’ ear and Jesus, thankfully, is able to stick it back on again.

Because he fails to pray, he fails to exercise self-control. And self-control isn’t something you muster up; it is a fruit of the Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, meekness, gentleness and self-control – are the outworking of the in-working of Christ living in us.

And when we don’t depend on Him and access Him and live in Him through prayer, the fruit of the Spirit is not exhibited in our lives - it’s Him.

And there’s not much self-control going on at this moment. And in the pressure, the awfulness of the betrayal, the darkness of the garden, Peter fails to respond as Jesus does. He responds out of his own humanness.

And Jesus rebukes him. And when He rebukes him, Peter fails to say he’s sorry. It is so important when Jesus rebukes us to immediately say we’re sorry.

And I think Peter is angry with Jesus at this point. I think he feels humiliated in this situation. And now he fails to remain loyal to Jesus.

We’re told in Matthew 26:55,

“All the disciples deserted him.”

All the disciples, including the one who said, “I will never desert You.” But he has just stood up for Jesus in front of everybody. He has lashed out to protect Jesus and Jesus has said, “No.” And he is nursing a hurting heart I think.

So he fails to keep his word (“I will never deny You”) and he fails to stand up for Jesus.

What a discouraging catalogue of failure. And most of us can actually click in at some point in that list of failures. Some of us know all those failures, coming out
of an over-inflated sense of our own ability to live for Christ and then discovering that we can’t.

So we’re in John 21 and in this beautiful passage there is not a word wasted. And I am simply going to walk us through it basically a verse at a time, looking at what goes on here.

So let’s read the first couple of verses. John 21, Verses 1-2:

“Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias” (which is Galilee).

“It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.

“‘I’m going to fish,’ Simon Peter told them, and they said, ‘We’ll go with you.’ So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.”

“Afterwards” Verse 1 says – after what? It’s always really important to put whatever we read in context in Scripture.

Now at the Sea of Galilee there are 7 disciples, it would seem. They have come from Jerusalem. We don’t know where the others are. How many times have they seen Jesus after His resurrection?

Well, Verse 14 tells us that they have seen Him twice already.

Verse 14:

“This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.”

So just flip back to John Chapter 20 and these are the two instances where they had seen Jesus.

John 20:19:

“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’

“After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”
“Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’

“And with that he breathed on them” (ruah) “and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’”

Verse 26:

“A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’”

“Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’

“Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’

“Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”

(That’s us – blessed are those who will live in 2010 and sit on the shores of Lake Galilee and have not seen, yet believe.)

His appearance reassured them that He was alive without a doubt. When they saw Him, they were convinced. But His appearance confused them as well, as it would us, because Jesus’ body was real. They can see it and they can touch it, but it is rather unusual now; it does rather strange things; it passes through walls.

So there are some things they recognize about Jesus but there are some things now that are a mystery about Jesus. He comes and He goes.

And interestingly enough, when He is with them in this moment, He focuses not on His face but on His wounds. I love that picture. The resurrected body of Jesus Christ has wounds.

That was a revelation to me. Why did God not allow His resurrected body to have no wounds? Because there is resurrection life beyond the wounding, but the wounds, the scars are still part of who He is in His resurrection life, as they are with me and as they are with you.

I have wounds in my life I would love them to be completely done away with. I would love them to disappear but it’s through the wounds that God ministers to people.

Jesus says to Thomas, ‘Put your fingers in the wounds.’
And I have had to learn in my life to stand up and pay attention and declare the wounds so that people can put their fingers in the wounds, because there is resurrected life beyond the wounding.

“Put your fingers in My wounds,” Jesus says. He seeks them out, but I am sure in their minds, the disciples were thinking, “Okay He is risen again. He told us all these things that we were going to do and to be. Are we all still on track? Is it all still good between us? Are we still involved in His plans?”

And yes, they are. He tells us that in John Chapter 20 Verse 21. He says to them,

“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

“We’re still on track. There is still a purpose, there is still a plan and you are still part of it.”

But He breathes into them the means, the resources, the ability, to carry out that plan. He breathes the Holy Spirit. “Receive the Holy Spirit; we’re still on track together. I am asking you, as the Father has sent Me, I am sending you. Are you still willing to be sent? And in that sending, if you forgive anyone who sins, they are forgiven. It’s about your relationship with Me; it’s now about your relationship with other people. That’s the plan, and you’re still in it.”

And in this context of amazement, I am sure - and uncertainty - seven of them head back to Galilee.

Now it’s very easy to look at this at face value and say, why on earth did they come back here? They were in Jerusalem; why were they running back to this place where they had been fishermen? Were they running away?

Were they going back here because they were very fearful of the implications of what Jesus had just said to them? (“As the Father has sent Me, so I am sending you.”)

They know what happened to Jesus when the Father sent Him. Were they frightened of the same thing happening to them?

Were they possibly giving up because they had failed and they feared they would fail again (“So we didn’t do very well fishing for men; let’s go back and fish for fish. We aren’t actually great at that either, but at least we know what we’re doing.”)?

Is that why they all ended up back here? And I have heard people preach that they should never have been back here. That’s not actually true. If you turn to Matthew Chapter 28, we see tucked away here Jesus’ instructions to the disciples.
Rather than running away by coming to Galilee, they were actually obeying Jesus. Matthew 28:8-10:

“So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

“Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’”

So what are they doing here? They are coming here because they are obeying Jesus and they are coming with the anticipation of seeing him here.

It’s very easy to make assumptions about people’s lives when we don’t know the facts. When people are in a situation we don’t think they should be in, so we decide they shouldn’t be in it and we tell them so when God might have told them, “Go to this place, be in this place.” And we come marching in suggesting they shouldn’t be when we don’t know what God has said to them.

And what God has said to them through Christ is, “Go back to Galilee.” He told them to come here.

So they arrive back here and they seem to have got a little stuck in no-man’s land. They seem to be here but they seem to be a little unsure about what to do here.

And when we are a little unsure about what to do, that’s when we very often revert to what we know how to do, to what’s familiar to us.

Let’s just read John Chapter 21:3

“They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.”

Verse 4:

“Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.”

He called out to them, ‘Friends, haven’t you caught any fish?’

“ ‘No,’ they answered.
“He said, ‘Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.’ When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

“Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, ‘It is the Lord,’ he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.

“When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish you have just caught.’

“Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’

“None of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord.

“Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

“This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.”

What an amazing passage.

Just look at Peter for a moment. Peter is still a leader. But he is not the confident leader he was before.

Verse 3:

“ ‘I am going out to fish,’ Simon Peter told them.”

He is basically going by himself. He doesn’t say, “Let’s go fishing” because I think he has lost his confidence in his ability to lead anybody anywhere. He just simply says, “I am going.”

He seems very quiet; he seems a subdued man and a changed man. Peter doesn’t want to be distant anymore from Jesus. He has walked at a distance; he knows what that’s like and he knows what that leads to.
And the moment he sees Him, he wants to be close to Him. And he is still impulsive and he is still driven by his love for Jesus, which didn’t falter even when his faith falters, it seems to me.

And so he heads off for the shore alone. Notice this. This is Peter’s moment with Jesus. The other disciples are there but this is all about his relationship with Jesus.

And this time when he jumps out of the boat, he can’t walk on water. He is heading for Jesus.

And they still need Jesus to show them where the fish are. They have fished all night, they haven’t caught the fish, and Jesus fills their nets.

And I am sure Peter relived this first encounter he’d had with Jesus on this shoreline, that we looked at in Luke 5, where he had fished all night and he’d caught nothing.

And what I love about this little scenario is that Peter is still in community with the other disciples. Although I am sure he is feeling very alone and probably the biggest failure, he doesn’t cut himself off from his fellow believers, his brothers in Christ.

And he is encouraged to see Jesus again by his friend, John. It’s John who says to Peter, “It’s the Lord.”

I wonder if you have a John in your life. I wonder when you get really down, do you hide away or do you keep yourself in the community of the believers and have somebody who points you back to Christ, who recognizes Him again, and who enables you to see Him again because they see him.

It’s a wonderful role that John plays in his life. And when we fail, it is wonderful help to have a friend who will show us Jesus again. And John is Peter’s friend.

You know it’s interesting all the gospels write about the three-fold denial of Peter – they all record that. But it’s only John who records this three-fold surrender and love again.

And I think he does this because he is very fond of Peter, and the restoration of Peter outweighs the denials of Peter. And John wants the world - he wants us who read this gospel to know that. This is his friend and this is Jesus restoring him.

And Peter, as he sees Jesus standing on this shoreline, from his boat, allows his heart to stir again. And almost despite himself, he leaves his nets again, and he
jumps into the water and he can’t help himself. And when he sees Jesus, wonder rises in him again.

And he responds with the whole of his being. He grabs his cloak – I guess they were fishing; he’d taken it off so it didn’t get tangled up in what they were doing and now he puts it back on again, and he leaps into the water.

And failure and sin have not wiped Peter out. Have they wiped you out? Have you really felt because of that one thing you did you are now disqualified as a disciple of Christ? You are not. You are not.

Jesus makes a breakfast and He invites you to come back to the meal table. And He has come back to this shoreline to call Peter back out of the boat to come back to the table.

And Peter jumps into the water – he’s almost childlike in his enthusiasm.

And what is Jesus doing? He is standing calmly on the shore.

I love Jesus’ response here. There is a beautiful little book been written called, “When We Get it Wrong” by Dominic Smart. And he says this about this moment:

“Fishing is for fish, not for men anymore. Fishing for self, not for Jesus’ kingdom. This is a reversal of what Jesus had called Simon Peter to.

“Simon Peter had turned the clock back in his life to the time before not only his failure, but also before he was involved in the enjoyable and successful enterprise that had gone so painfully wrong. The others are there too; it’s just like the whole thing had never happened. Only now there is the pain to live with.

“So what does Jesus do? Does He sit down south in Jerusalem at Headquarters, Christ behind the desk, impatiently drumming His fingers and asking, “Where are they? They should be here. Are they letting Me down again? Where is their commitment?

“No, Jesus goes to where Peter is.”

Let me just say that to you again: “Jesus goes to where Peter is.”

“Jesus can understand the pain, the need for a safe place. He can find Peter when Peter isn’t even looking for Him. Jesus meets us exactly where we are.”
Jesus calmly stands on the shore in full control of Himself, in full control of the situation. He is waiting His time, He is watching the disciples; He is listening to them. He is seeing them fail to fish again. And He has set the stage – He’s probably busy getting the breakfast ready I guess, because He had some fish there already. He’s been fishing early in the morning here on Lake Galilee.

But He maybe hasn’t got enough fish, so He suggests they catch a few more, so they catch 153 fish. I don’t think that’s what He really was intending but there are 153 fish in the net when they come back to the shore.

And Jesus reassures the disciples that they are His friends. “Friends!” He calls to them from the shore before He exposes their failure.

Unfortunately in many of our lives, the people who come to rebuke us expose our failure before they reassure us that we are their friend. But that’s not the way Jesus works.

“Friends!” He calls. And it’s back into the friendship that they are being drawn, the relationship with Jesus. But He has to reveal to them their inadequacy again and their need for Him, and He does it through the world they understand – the world of fish. They are unable to fish the way they want to. They can’t do it without Him.

So He shows how life is futile outside His will for them and for us. And victory is only certain when Jesus is pleased to grant it in our lives. And here He is pleased to grant it and they come back with a net full of fish.

And what an amazing picture of Christ here - this risen Lord Jesus has not been robbed of anything by death. He is still Lord. He is Lord of the universe, He is Lord of death, He is Lord of life, He is Lord of creation, He is Lord of the seas, He is Lord of the storms.

He doesn’t emerge as the risen Lord diminished and depleted; He is still Lord of all those things. And He knows where the fish are.

And by providing the fish He is saying to the disciples, “I am still in this and I will still sustain you and I will still supply and I will still meet your need” (as He has done throughout their whole journey together.)

And I love the fact that here Jesus expresses His love and His friendship to His disciples in such a practical way. He doesn’t say, “Okay boys, bring the boat in and let’s have a talk. Let’s just have a theological lesson on failure and guidance and where did it all go wrong?”

Jesus doesn’t do that and real friends don’t do that.
They are tired, they are hungry, they are discouraged; they are feeling failures. Do you know what they need? They do not need a sermon; they need a warm fire and a friend and a meal.

Woe betide us when our friends are in a weak place, we barge in and bash them over the head with verses.

I have a beautiful friend – she is on this tour – she has seen me go up and down and in and out and round about and she has always expressed her love to me in practical ways.

I will never forget one of the times I was at my lowest and she arrived at my house, not with a lecture, but with a bowl of soup, hot soup she had made. And I was on crutches and I have snapped both my Achilles tendons (I know you wouldn’t believe that when you saw me leaping up Mount Sinai, but that was a miracle in itself).

But I got to a place where I thought I wouldn’t walk properly again. And she didn’t come and say, you know, “All things happen to them…(what’s that verse?) …good things happen.”

I mean she didn’t come and say those sorts of things to me. That wasn’t the time or the place. She just turned up and said, “I’m in this with you. I know you can’t cook. I know what you need is a meal.” She didn’t say those words; she just brought the soup.

And Jesus brings the soup and He brings the fish and He’s on the shore and He’s ready to feed them in the place they are.

Why does Jesus do this? Because Jesus’ life is all about showing the full extent of His love to us. In John 13 when He gets the towel and nobody else has taken the role of the servant, and nobody else is willing to, Jesus quietly gets up from the meal, wraps Himself in a towel, gets a basin and works His way through 24 dirty feet – 12 disciples, probably bunions, calluses, ingrown toenails, the whole bit.

Do you know why? John 13 tells us:

“He now showed them the full extent of his love.”

How does He do that? By getting on His knees and washing their feet.

And now again, He shows them the full extent of His love, and He is saying to the disciples, “We are still in partnership. You might not feel as though we are. You might feel you are disqualified through your failure but you’re not.”
Verse 10:

“Bring some of the fish you have just caught.”

So He allows them to contribute to the breakfast. Of course He could have caught enough fish to make the breakfast, but He didn’t do. He allowed them to add their fish that they had caught to the breakfast. And He receives what they bring to the breakfast.

And Simon Peter (I love this); he drags the net ashore – he drags the whole net ashore. He is so excited and so wanting to give everything to Jesus. At this shore he dragged 153 fish. “Anything Jesus; I will give You anything. I will give You everything – whatever You ask. A few fish for breakfast, 153 fish; it doesn’t matter; I will just give it all to You. I have withheld from You; I have withheld my loyalty to You. Will You please take the fish?”

I am sure the other disciples just watched and chuckled at Peter dragging this net up the shore. He was desperate to give back to Jesus.

“Come and have breakfast,” Jesus says. And He breaks the bread.

Do you think their eyes were opened when He broke the bread? “(We’ve been here before. We’ve watched Him break the bread before.”) And now He is breaking the bread again.

Let me read to you what Jill Briscoe says in her lovely little book on Peter, which is called “By Hook or By Crook”. She says this:

“Peter jumped over the side of the boat to swim to the shore. ‘There he goes again,’ James surely said to John. But Jesus, used to Peter’s spontaneous and dramatic reactions, simply said, ‘Come and have breakfast.’”

And then Jill says,

“In my own experience, I have been invited to many such breakfasts with Jesus. These have been times to say, ‘I’m sorry’ for denying Him and times to hear Him tell me I’m forgiven and send me on my way.

“I learned early in my Christian experience to try and keep short accounts with God, not to let a huge pile of things stack up between us before we have that vital breakfast meeting.

“But I have also discovered that if I return to my entanglement, He will not leave me there. He will first require honesty from me. He will ask me if I have caught any fish lately, and I will need to answer truthfully, ‘No.’
“Then, if indeed my life has been barren and unfruitful, He will show me how to redress the situation. When I cease to be effective, it’s time to have breakfast with Jesus.”

And it’s time to have breakfast with Jesus; they have no fish on their line. And Jesus is teaching and re-teaching a principle that we must never move beyond or away from in our Christian life.

If you are not writing anything else down this morning, please write this down:

**Jesus can only do through you what you allow Him to do to you.**

**He can only do through you what you allow Him to do to you.**

In John 13:

“Unless I wash you, you have no part in me.”

“I wash you; you wash other people.”

Now we are on the shoreline. “I feed you before I tell you to go and feed other people. I wash you; you wash others. I feed you; you feed others.”

You can only give to anybody else what you have received from Christ. Otherwise you have nothing else to give.

So He is literally feeding Peter the fish and the bread before He is going to say to him, “Feed My sheep.”

God has to do it to you before He will do it through you. You can only deliver people when you have been delivered. You can only be in the rescuing ministry when you personally have been rescued.

And all servants of God have to learn this lesson. And if you haven’t learned it, then I am sorry to tell you that you have been totally ineffective and you are working out of your own strength. You are not giving what you have received.

Peter is about to receive from Him. It’s not enough to renew our relationship with Jesus, to come back into a place of friendship, forgiveness and fellowship and then crawl back into a hole. Because, remember what I told you yesterday: it’s not about me and it’s not about you.

Of course the friendship is important and of course Jesus loves us and that relationship is essential, but it is through that relationship that Jesus can reach other people who don’t know Him.
So Jesus is very, very concerned to restore fellowship, but He is also very concerned to restore “followship”, where it is between me and Him and now it’s between me and other people where I step out into a broken world to reach people who don’t know Him.

And out of that fellowship, our followship is re-directed, our activity, our direction; we resume the task out of restored fellowship with Him.

And Peter has come back into this relationship with Jesus for one simple reason: because Jesus prayed that he would.

Luke 22:31:

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you (I have prayed for you, Simon,) that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

Isn’t that an incredible statement? “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, but I know it’s going to; I’m just not telling you that at the moment. I know you will turn away (that’s all in brackets) – when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

Jesus prayed that Peter’s faith would not fail, and it did. I know many of you parents have prayed for your children and you have prayed that their faith will not fail, and it has done. That doesn’t mean we stop praying. Jesus didn’t stop praying at this point.

“I have prayed, Peter, that your faith will not fail.” And then we have a catalogue of failure. “But when you turn back,” (keep that in your mind with your children) “when you turn back”… (and fill the gap with prayer).

Sometimes I meet people and I say to them, “Who prays for you?” And they say, “Nobody.”

Wrong. Jesus prays for us. Jesus always prays for us.

I remember hearing Jill Briscoe (who I just quoted from) say one day she got up in the morning and she was feeling so discouraged and down and everything was dark. And she just thought, “Well I’ll read my Bible and I’ll pray and I’ll set off into the day.”

And she read her Bible and as she went through her breakfast and the half hour passed and she got up to go through the front day and face the day, everything lifted.
And in her mind she began to think, “I know what has happened this morning; I have faithful friends who are praying for me.” And she stepped into the daylight and the day and she was sort of saying to herself and to God, you know, “Thank You for my friends who have been praying for me” and she heard Jesus say, “I’m praying for you!” She never forgot it.

So now Peter needs to move beyond his failure. And in order for that to happen, Jesus has to get him on his own, and He has to ask him a series of very, very difficult questions.

He has to do this to allow Peter to revisit the moment where it all went wrong and to probably expose his deepest wound, which, if covered over, will never heal – you know that.

If you don’t clean out a wound it festers and there is a festering wound in Peter. So Jesus is going in very gently, taking off the band-aid and looking at what’s underneath.

So let’s look at this, what I see as a kind of de-briefing that Jesus leads Peter through.

John 21:15:

“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?’

‘Yes, Lord,’ he said ‘you know that I love you.’

Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’

Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me?’

He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’

Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’

The third time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ He said, ‘Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.’

Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’
“Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, ‘Follow me!’”

What is Jesus doing? Well Jesus has set a scene here on the lakeshore to bring back memories for Peter: a charcoal fire, warming his hands on a fire. (Peter warmed his hands on the charcoal fire of the enemy just before he denied Jesus.)

“Simon son of John” – that’s a very formal name He gives to him. “Let’s go back to the beginning. This is who you were when I met you, remember? You were Simon son of John. And I talked to you about becoming Peter but it’s all got a little bit lost along the way, so let’s go back, Simon son of John.”

Peter the Rock seems to be a shattered stone at this point. There doesn’t seem much chance of him ever becoming the rock that Jesus called him to be (“You are Peter”).

“Let’s start again,” Jesus says. “I singled you out from fishing, from your fellow men, and now I am singling you out again. Do you love Me?”

And the word Jesus uses here is the word agape. This is a divine love; it is not a human love. It comes from God alone. “Do you agape Me – love Me more than these?”

More than these what? Well, it could mean three things as far as I understand. More than these fish – in other words more than your business, more than your life, more than the things, the nets that you’re back in again. Do you love Me more than these, the world you know and the world you are familiar with?”

“Do you love Me more than these? These fellow disciples; do you love Me more than they love Me?” (I don’t think it means that.)

“Do you love Me more than these?” Do you love Me more than you love your fellow disciples? Do you agape Me?”

And Peter answers yes and no. “Yes, Lord, You know I phileo You.” “I don’t love You with that love, Jesus, because, to my horror, I have discovered I am not able to. I do not have what it takes to love You with that love. So I will tell You the truth, Jesus, I do love You. I love You greater than my fish and I love you greater than my fellow disciples, but I phileo You.

And with the phileo love, Jesus says, “There is still a job to do, Peter; feed My lambs.”

And then He says to him, “Do you truly love Me? (Because he said, “I truly” so He picks up on that – “I truly love You”)

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“Do you truly love Me? Let’s forget about the other people; let’s forget about the “more than these”. Let’s focus on you, Peter. Do you truly love Me?”

And Peter replies, “Here’s the truth: I can rise no higher than saying, Jesus, I phileo You. I no longer have any illusions about the strength of my love. Lord, You know that.”

And Jesus says again, “There is still a job to do. Feed My lambs. Take care of My sheep.”

And now the third question: “Simon son of John, do you phileo Me? Okay, let’s get to where you are because you can’t be where I am at this point and you know that full well. So I’m right where you are - let’s begin with that. Let’s begin with the little bit of love that you know you have. Do you phileo Me?”

And again Jesus has come to right where Peter is. “You say you have genuine affection for Me, Peter. Are you absolutely sure?”

And at this point, the Bible tells us, Peter is hurt. I think there are lots of reasons Peter is hurt here. I think he is hurt because Jesus is pressing the point.

But Jesus is pressing the point in front of all the other disciples. How humiliating is that? You now feel the biggest failure and your biggest failure is being revealed to everybody else. And the questioning is going on in front of everybody else. There is nothing to tell us He drew aside and asked these questions.

Why is He doing that? He is doing it because He is showing the full extent of His love to Peter, not the reverse. And He is helping Peter discover for himself that he really does love Jesus. He is pushing him and pushing him, for Peter to say back to Him, “I do love You.”

But you know He is also pushing him in front of the other disciples to reveal to the other disciples how much Peter loves Jesus. And that is going to be absolutely essential.

He is restoring Peter in front of the disciples and re-instating him to feed His sheep and take care of His lambs.

Why? Because Peter is going to be the one who stands up and preaches to thousands of people and who leads the disciples in the feeding of the sheep and taking care of the lambs.

And this is the moment when Jesus re-commissions him. None of them realize this is going on until later. And none of them could ever say a few months down the track, “We’re not sure if Peter really loves Jesus.”
Now they are sure, now Peter is sure. This is not about Jesus being sure; this is about Peter being sure, and the disciples hearing it.

And Peter knows he can’t love as he wants to and he admits in front of everybody his own inadequacy. He refuses to make claims for himself.

And recovery for Peter does not mean perfection; it means acknowledging where he is and being realistic about his assessment of who he is.

Peter is re-instated to his position as leader of the flock, as shepherd of the flock.

But listen to me, all you leaders, his re-instatement does not come because of his strength; it comes because of his brokenness.

God calls leaders who are broken people and who are aware of their brokenness and their weakness and their inability to love and to lead and to be the people God has called them to be.

And Peter now is fully aware of his own shortcomings (“I have not got what it takes”).

“But Jesus – and it all boils down to my life – that’s all I know, Jesus. I love You, limited as that is.”

The Christian life is a risk. The biggest risk you are ever going to take in your Christian life is to answer this question: “Do you love Me?” That’s the biggest risk you are ever going to take.

And if you dare to take the risk and answer the question, what you will find is that you step into the will of God through the door of acknowledging your love for Christ.

“If you love Me, you will obey Me.” I wonder how many people amongst us are trying to obey Christ and they don’t love Him. They don’t have a relationship with Him. They just feel “He came from heaven to earth to save the cross. How many times will He have to tell me off?”

So I have to keep obeying because I should. There are no shoulds in the Christian life – there are no shoulds. It’s about loving Christ and out of that love we obey Him.

Do we obey Him because He’s a megalomaniac and wants the whole world to run around obeying Him to make Him feel good? No.
We were created to live in a relationship with God where we obey Him. And it’s only in obedience to Him that we will ever be fulfilled as human beings.

He wants us to obey Him, not so He can feel good about Himself, but so we can be released into all we were created to be, to live in obedience to God. He asks us to obey Him because He loves us. In order to obey Him, we love Him.

“If you love Me, you will obey Me.” The prerequisite for being reconditioned is not more knowledge of God. It’s not more studies. It’s not writing more sermons. It’s not going to more conferences. It’s simply loving Jesus.

However, there are two parts to this restoration. “Do you love Me?” Jesus says. And you might say, “Yes, I do.”

It’s not hard because Jesus is the most loveable person in all of time. He is wonderful. How could we not love Him?

But it doesn’t stop there. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if it did? “Do you love Me?” He says. As we receive His forgiveness and we receive reassurance of His love, He has a job for us to do.

And I think a lot of us have gotten stuck between receiving His love and giving His love, and Peter is stuck. Jesus heard Peter deny Him three times. He now allows Peter to say three times that he loves Him. And maybe each “I love You” cancels out each “I deny You”.

But it doesn’t stop there because He now gives him three tasks to do. “Okay, the past is over; it’s done. The denials are over. The present ‘I love You, I love You, I love You’ is right now. What about the future, Peter? Here’s the future: feed My lambs, take care of My sheep, feed My sheep.”

And the love we have for Christ is not something we sit in a little place all by ourselves declaring, “I love Jesus, I love Jesus.” It’s worked out and confessed in our action and our attitude to other people, not just to Christ Himself.

And therein lies complete healing. If you think it’s all about you just receiving all His love and forgiveness, you are not fully healed. You will step in and step out and feed His sheep and take care of His lambs and there you will discover complete healing.

Only our ability and desire to love others will release us from the bondage of our own guilt and remorse, says a certain writer.

It’s the pouring out – the pouring in and the pouring out.
So who are these people we are called to love? Well, they are everybody – they are the flock, the flock. They are the lambs and the sheep, they are the little people and the big people, they are the young people and the old people, they are the immature people (the lambs) and they are the old people, the mature people (the sheep). They are the silly people, the silly little lambs.

We used to live in a field at Capernwray Hall and I loved playtime, which usually came around about 5 o’clock in the evening when all the lambs get together and play. That’s all they are doing is playing.

And we had little humps and bumps in the field and one of them would run up and they’d play king of the castle. And their moms would be grazing in the distance pretending they weren’t watching what their children were doing (but of course they were).

And sheep are crazy animals. I don’t know if you have ever lived amongst them, but they are crazy. If they eat too much and lie down and get on their backs, they just bloat. And their legs stick out and they cannot get back on their fronts again – they cannot get back on their feet.

If you have read “Far from the Madding Crowd” by Thomas Hardy, there is an amazing moment in there where the shepherd goes and literally punctures the sheep’s stomach and all the air comes out. And then it can get back on its stomach and stand up again.

But one of the stupidest things sheep do - if one of them is running across a field and there is nothing to jump over, and the first sheep jumps, guess what? All the other sheep jump over.

I watched the other day – I was sitting in a hotel foyer (and this actually wasn’t our group, I’m glad to tell you). A group got off a bus and there was a turnstile, which was really quite cumbersome and took quite a while. And next to the turnstile was a totally open door.

Have you experienced these here? The first people went through the turnstile, so what did all the others do?

And I felt like shouting, “Why don’t you use the door?” I mean, how ridiculous! Sheep are ridiculous.

If you are in leadership, the people you are looking after are ridiculous, and so am I because I am a sheep too, so I know how to be ridiculous. These are the people that Jesus asks us, and Peter, to look after.

And sheep get sick. We know about that. Lots of you have been sick on this trip. You are not disqualified when you are sick. I really take my hat off to you folks.
who have health issues and age issues and you have pushed through the pain barriers here. It’s been remarkable to watch you. I hope, when I am the same age as some of you, I will still want to come to Israel and climb mountains on camels and (I still haven’t recovered so I don’t know how you have!)…

When you emerge from Satan’s sieve, which, trust me, we’re all in, and Christ is praying for us, do you know what He wants us to do?

Luke 22:31:

“Strengthen the brothers and the sisters.”

We’re loved to love. We are strengthened to strengthen. But now instead of doing it in our own strength, we will do it in His strength.

Because we have failed, we will be patient with those who have failed.

Because we are hurting, we will be patient and loving to those who are hurting.

Because we have turned away, we will be patient with the sheep who go wandering off, push through a fence and then find they can’t get back, and we have to go and find them.

Love never fails. Love never fails. We do, but He doesn’t. “And Peter, you still love Me. That love you once professed” -‘I am ready to go to prison and to death’, Peter had said in Luke 22:31- and Jesus took him at his word. “Now Peter you will. That was your expression of your love to Me – ‘I am ready to go to prison and to death.’”

In John 21:18-19 – I read them to you: “You will go and you will be led where you do not want to go.”

And do you know, following Christ involves going where we don’t want to go.

“Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted.”

Maybe it’s time to stop going where you want and be willing to go where you don’t want to go.

“When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

How humiliating for a strapping, young Peter to hear these words, and this is where following Christ is going to take him.
So He reminds Peter of the words He said to him on this shore at the beginning of His ministry.

“Follow me!”

“Let’s begin again, Peter.” Jesus doesn’t just say that once; He says that every day of our lives.

You got up this morning to have a choice – are you in or are you out? “Do you love Me or do you not? Will you obey Me or will you not?”

What happened yesterday is not what’s going to happen today. You cannot live on yesterday’s commitment. Surrender – this is a new day.

And Peter in his wonderful way starts asking questions about other people.

Verse 20:

“Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, ‘Lord, who is going to betray you?)

“When Peter saw him, he asked the Lord, ‘Lord, what about him?’

“Jesus answered, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.’”

Go Peter! I actually think he is deflecting at this point. You know when somebody is asking you questions and it gets a bit awkward? They deflect and say, “What about …?”

“Well never mind about them; we’re actually having this discussion.”

(You do that sometimes, Charles. He tries to sort of head me off at the pass.)

Jesus is not going to be headed off at the pass. “It doesn’t matter about him, Peter. Never mind about him. Get your eyes off the other sheep. Follow Me. You resume the task. And step back Peter into being the person I called you to be. Put yourself back in My hands. Allow Me to keep chipping away because I am still willing to draw the lion out of you but you have to be willing to stay in My hands.”

“Follow me” was the first call Jesus made to Peter, and it was the last call, and it’s the only call. “Follow Me.” And it’s not about following Him and He’s ten yards in front and I’m running along behind saying, “Oh Jesus, I can’t keep up.”
Because where does Jesus live now? Does He live up there? No. He lives in here. So when He calls me to follow Him, I simply pay attention to the whisper, the inner voice, the indwelling Holy Spirit through His Word.

You can’t follow Christ without being in His Word. You can’t make it up. He has an individual plan for each of us. Where are we going to find it? We’re not going to find it sitting with our legs crossed.

Bent knees; broken heart. Hang your heart over Scripture; there you will meet Christ and there you will hear Him say to you again and again, “Follow Me this direction, that direction, that person, that place, not that place; this place.”

He is not in front. I’m not stumbling along behind. He is within – Christ in me, leading, directing as I surrender to Him.

“If it’s You, Jesus, if it’s You, bid me come.” That’s what Peter said the first time. “If it’s You…” And without a doubt it’s Jesus, back in his life. “We’re back on track. Peter, follow Me.”

“How Jesus?”

“Answer the question: Do you love Me? Do you love Me?”

That might be the only question God has brought you to Israel to ask you. It’s so simple if you are to have missed it. Do you love Me?

Yes! Inadequate as it is God, I do!

“Okay, then we’re in business.”

Let’s pray together. Lord Jesus, thank You for Your patience in our lives. Thank You, You watch us stumble and fall like willful sheep and You go ahead and call us back to yourself. You meet us in the place of our failure. You restore us. You reinstate us. You re-commission us. You send us out to give what we have received.

And Lord, thank You, You call us back into relationship, not into rule keeping. And in that relationship we know you love us, so we can cry out again and again. I call out again and again because I am trusting You.

Lord, I pray amongst us, 500 of us, we would have the courage as individuals to get alone with You and answer Your question, “Do you love Me?”

And uncomfortable as that may be, and however much we might want to deflect and get You to put Your eyes on somebody else, the John standing next to us, You refuse to do that. Thank You, You refuse to do that.
God, I ask we would restore eye contact with You; we would look back into Your eyes as You ask us, “Do you love Me?” And we would look You full in the face and we would say, “Yes, Jesus, I love You, I love You. It’s not perfect; in fact it’s a shambles, but I love You.”

And then we will hear You say again, “Follow Me, follow Me.”

Thank You Lord Jesus. Thank You for not giving up on us. Amen.