

## “Resurrected Love”

Scripture: John 21:15-19  
Rev. Pen Peery

May 11, 2025



First Presbyterian  
Church of Charlotte

We are continuing to share stories of the resurrected Jesus as we consider what it might look like for us to have our lives shaped by the gift of that good news.

Today, our story comes from the gospel of John. The story happens when the resurrected Jesus meets the disciples on the beach on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Lucy will preach on the first part of that story next week, but today I am going to focus on a conversation that Jesus has with Simon Peter.

Before we hear this story, let us go to God in prayer and then be centered by the choir. Let us pray:

Tend to us, Lord. And settle our hearts and restless minds from the churn of our everyday worries. Help us to listen for your voice – for your truth – for your call to us through your holy word. We ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.”

A second time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.”

He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him a third time, “Do you love me.” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you

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where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)

After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

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Perhaps like you, I was paying attention to news coming out of Vatican City this week as the Roman Catholic Church selected a new Pope.

When images started circulating of white smoke billowing from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, I was relieved to hear that the new Pope’s name was not Anna I or Lucy I. (Though that would have made headlines, for sure.)

Leo the 14 th is the 267 th Pope of the Catholic church. He’s Da Pope.

(Sorry...couldn’t help myself.) In spite of the fact that the majority of the world is not Catholic (or Christian)...and – in spite of the fact that both John Calvin and Martin Luther might be rolling over in their graves to know that we’re talking about a POPE in a Protestant and Reformed worship service right now...I think it’s okay to admit that there is almost universal intrigue whenever we see the Catholic church select a new leader.

Perhaps one of the reasons why is because there are so very few institutions that reach that far back into history. And – as your preacher this week – hearing about the Catholic Church naming their 267 th Pope, spanning more than 2,000 years – I became very aware of the fact that today we would be reading a story about the resurrected Jesus having an encounter with Peter.

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Peter – who was called Simon before Jesus gave him a new name – is the one about whom Jesus said “upon this rock I will build my church.” Peter is considered by the Roman Catholic Church to be the very first Pope. And though there wasn’t the pomp and circumstance back then...or a group of Cardinals who took multiple votes...or a chimney with white smoke...what we see in today’s Scripture you might consider to be the first conclave – because, in it, Peter is charged with the work that he is to carry out.

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If you remember Peter’s story, you can imagine that having a direct encounter with the resurrected Jesus might have been a bit...awkward. Powerful and inspiring, for sure – but also awkward.

After Jesus was arrested, remember, Peter – like the rest of the disciples, deserted Jesus. While he was trying to blend into the crowd and escape notice, three times – someone recognized Peter as one of Jesus’s disciples. Three times, Peter denied that he knew Jesus. And then, after the third time – to make matters worse – Peter remembered that Jesus predicted his denial.

It’s hard to miss the parallels, right? Three times – Peter denies Jesus. Three times – the resurrected Jesus asks Peter “do you love me.”

I’ve preached sermons – I’m sure, even, from this pulpit in years’ past – I’ve

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preached sermons that treat this as a redemption story for Peter. As a kind of penance – where Peter’s three-fold affirmation of love for Jesus somehow erases the sins of his past.

That problem, though, is that – although convenient and maybe poetic because of the parallels – this doesn’t match the kind of person that we proclaim Jesus to be. Jesus – especially the resurrected Jesus – doesn’t wait around for us to – tit-for-tat – atone for our past sins. The forgiveness that Jesus offers, as seen on the cross and through an empty tomb, isn’t contingent on us earning it based on our righteous work. The cross and the empty tomb are evidence of a grace and forgiveness that comes to us freely – and without and in-spite of our best efforts to earn it.

After all, if we could earn forgiveness ourselves – then we wouldn’t need Jesus to be crucified or raised.

No – this time as I preach on this text, I see what happens between Jesus and Peter differently. New Testament scholar Karoline Lewis says that what is going on in this passage is that Jesus calling Peter to a new identity <sup>1</sup>.

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It’s just like what happened to the most recently anointed Pope. Until last Thursday, he was Robert Francis Prevost who had one kind of vocation – or calling – as a priest and a cardinal. After Thursday, his name was Leo the 14<sup>th</sup> – with a whole different kind of calling.

When Jesus asked three times if Peter loved him, he wasn’t putting him to a test.

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Rather – he was making sure that Peter really understood the ministry to which he was called.

Simon - do you love me? Feed my sheep.

Simon - do you love me? Tend my lambs.

Simon - do you love me? Feed my sheep.

Jesus – the Good Shepherd – was empowering Peter – the one upon whom he would build the church – to take up the shepherd’s staff. Soon – the resurrected Jesus would ascend into heaven. Before he did, he needed to make sure that the sheep were left in the charge of someone else.

All these years later – guess who is called to continue that work? (I’ll give you a hint – it’s not just a man whose new name is Leo the 14 th ...but it is the Church – both Roman Catholic and every other stripe...including our own...who bears that responsibility.)

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If I understand the text, what Jesus wants his church to see is that the way we show our love for Christ is by taking care of, providing for, and tending to the sheep. Not just of our flock – but of all flocks. Not just in our fold – but in every fold. “I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold; I must bring them in also,” 2 Jesus said.

1 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/do-you-love-me>

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2 John 10:14

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Sometimes...not all the time...but, sometimes I think we resort to this default setting where we make Jesus...and Jesus's love...about us. And we make our love for God all about Jesus. It's this kind of closed system...it makes for an individualistic faith.

I confess that this used to be my critique of our more evangelical brothers and sisters. I grew up in the Presbyterian Church – and, along the way – I saw and experienced how my more evangelical friends approached faith. I noticed they talked a lot more about having “a personal relationship with Christ” than I did. They talked about their “spiritual walk” with God. They sang (and, who am I kidding...I sang, too, because they were catchy) – we would sing what I jokingly called “Jesus is my boyfriend” songs at camp – songs about “me and Jesus” ...and the love we have for each other.

As for me...well...when I decided to be a pastor and went to seminary...I learned about Jesus. I studied the Bible in the original language. I took classes in Reformed theology and spent countless hours understanding the historical context into which our faith was formed. I learned how Jesus was shaped by the Old Testament prophets – which is where Jesus found the motivation to teach his disciples to love our neighbors as ourselves...and to seek after justice...and to challenge systems that perpetuated inequality...Jesus was interested in all of that – and I knew that all of that was part of what it meant to call ourselves Christian.

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Full of knowledge – I started my calling as a pastor in the church of Jesus Christ at a church in Richmond, Virginia, and not long after I started, I met another new pastor named Corey. Corey was also Presbyterian – and...I quickly discovered...he was very evangelical. He had great hair. Goodness. And horn-rimmed glasses. His church let him wear jeans in the pulpit. He talked a lot about his personal relationship with Jesus – and was very interested in asking people about their spiritual walk.

I confess I drew some quick judgments about Corey. I had known evangelicals like him before. He worked at a suburban church and I figured he was going to spend his time evangelizing affluent suburban teenagers so that they, too, could feel even more comfortable and secure in their individual faith journey with Jesus.

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And then I learned that Corey and his wife hadn't moved to the suburbs, but – rather – had decided to live in an intentionally mixed race and mixed income community in the inner city. And I learned that Corey helped to start a recreation and tutoring ministry at a Title I school. And I learned that Corey was helping his affluent, suburban congregation learn about the need for affordable housing and learn about the impact of generational poverty – especially in communities of color.

Twenty years later, Corey is still at that same church. He's now the head pastor. He has led his congregation to impact the city in remarkable ways – to impact the people...particularly marginalized people...in the city in remarkable ways – all the

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while making it clear that their love for Jesus was what leads them to serve.

I wonder sometimes if I spend too much of my time and energy thinking about tending to or feeding the sheep.

I know it's important to learn about what impacts the sheep – I know it's important to study the history – I know it's important to consider all the dynamics upstream that help create a challenging environment for the sheep to thrive...it's just that...sometimes...that's where I stop. Up here. In my head.

Meanwhile – the sheep are still hungry. They need shelter. They need an affordable place to live. They need protection under the law. They need good schools. They need access to social capital. They need their homes repaired after Hurricane Helene. They need to know of our solidarity in the midst of a communist regime in Cuba. They need dignity.

They need action.

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One of the many things my momma tried to teach me when I was coming along was the importance of writing a good thank-you note.

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I remember her sitting at the kitchen table after her birthdays, or after someone dropped off a casserole, or after she attended a dinner party – writing a robust note of thanks on her stationary and then walking it to the mailbox.



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I haven't always been as diligent as she may have wished in picking up that thank-you note habit (right now, in fact, I am thinking of someone in this room to whom I owe a thank-you note for something kind you did for me...) – but, even so, my momma taught me the value of gratitude through her own example.

The resurrected Jesus asks, “Do you love me?”

Yes Jesus – you know that we love you.

You know that we know what a gift that it was that you save us from our sins.

You know how much we need the forgiveness that we have in you.

You know that we appreciate the fact that you want to be in relationship with us.

You know that we love you.

And the way we show gratitude for Jesus's love is by feeding the sheep.

So let us be thankful by serving our neighbors.

Let us be thankful by stocking the food pantry.

Let us be thankful by welcoming the stranger.

Let us be thankful by volunteering in a school.

Jesus doesn't need us to earn his love – but he asks us to show our gratitude by reflecting his love beyond ourselves and toward others.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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