

47. His Appearance by the Sea

Before his death, Jesus promised his disciples, “But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee” (Mark 14:28). On the day of his resurrection, when he showed himself to certain women, he told them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me” (Matthew 28:10). Before the disciples returned to Galilee from Judea, where the Lord had been crucified and buried, he appeared to them two times. Since the Jewish Passover is followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasts seven days, the disciples had waited for the end of this feast before heading home to Galilee. But today we will see a narrative where the resurrected Lord actually appears to the followers in Galilee, a province where a large part of his ministry had taken place. The text is found in John 21:1-14:

“After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself: Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We are going with you also.’ They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Children, have you any food?’ They answered Him, ‘No.’ And He said to them, ‘Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea.

“But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.’ Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. Jesus said to

them, ‘Come and eat breakfast.’ Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, ‘Who are You?’—knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.”

Like the other appearances of Jesus, this one served to reassure the disciples of the reality of the resurrection. It was not simply a vision that they had seen the preceding times. He was not a ghost or a spirit. After all, it’s not likely that a spirit would light a fire to cook fish and that he would share a meal with people. Even the first time that Jesus showed himself to his disciples, he had made the effort to make them understand this truth. According to Luke 24:39-43, he told them:

“Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. But while they still did not believe for joy, and marveled, He said to them, ‘Have you any food here?’ So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence.”

As we’ve already seen in the previous three lessons, the disciples of Jesus, although they were not predisposed to believe in the resurrection, ended up being totally convinced. In fact, they gave their lives rather than renounce their testimony.

But the narrative of this appearance of Jesus by Sea of Galilee (or the Sea of Tiberius, as it was called near the end of the first century when the apostle John wrote) contains not only another assurance of the resurrection, but also an interesting exchange between Jesus and the apostle Peter:

“So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Feed My lambs.’ He said to him again a second time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Tend My sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you

love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?' And he said to Him, 'Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed My sheep. Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.' This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me.'" (John 21:15-19).

Some people, believing that Jesus established Peter as chief among the apostles and head of the Church on earth, take this passage to support this idea. They state that in telling Peter to care for his sheep, Jesus designated him to be chief shepherd for the flock of Christians. If we take into account the words of Peter himself in his first epistle, we will have difficulty in accepting this theory. In 1 Peter 5:1-4, the apostle actually attributes the work of shepherding the flock of God, not to himself but to the elders of the local church. He said, "The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder... Shepherd the flock of God which is among you... not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." In addition, Peter clearly identifies the true pastor or Chief Shepherd: "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away." The only sovereign pastor of the church is, of course, Jesus, the one who will appear to reward each one in bestowing on them the crown of glory. No other supreme shepherd is mentioned in the New Testament.

So why this scene where Jesus asks Peter if he loves him and answers by telling him to care for his sheep and to follow him? To better understand, it is necessary to remind ourselves of what Peter had done. During the last supper, before Jesus was arrested, the Lord told his disciples that they would all fall away and abandon him. According to Mark 14:29-31:

"Peter answered, 'I will never leave you, even though all the rest do!' Jesus said to Peter, 'I tell you that before the cock crows twice tonight, you will say three times that you do not know me.' Peter answered even more strongly, 'I will never say that, even if I have to die with you!'"

But as we know, Peter actually did deny Jesus three times in a row. He even swore that he did not

know him. Now Jesus asks him, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" This question could be understood in two ways. Jesus may have indicated with his hand or glance the boat, the nets and the fish when he asked, "Do you love me more than these things? Are you ready to give up all hope of success in the affairs of the world, all the security and small comforts of your old life in consecrating yourself to my service?" But another way of understanding this phrase would be the following: "Do you love me more than these do?", speaking, of course, of the other apostles of whom Peter had said, "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be." Now Peter no longer makes any comparisons. He simply said, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." But Jesus asks the same question a second and a third time. And although Peter may be grieved that Jesus asks him the question three times, surely thinking of the three times that he denied his master, this was a blessing. In a spirit of forgiveness, Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to erase the memory of his triple denial with this triple statement of love.

After this reaffirmation of Peter's sincere love, Jesus told him, "Follow me" (v. 19). It is good to remember that this is the way that Jesus called men to be his apostles. To the future apostles, he had said in Matthew 4:19, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." In chapter 9.9 of the same gospel, we read: "As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' So he arose and followed Him." By his unfaithfulness, his denial of the testimony he was to bear for Jesus, Peter had disqualified himself to be an apostle and witness. Having sincerely and humbly reaffirmed his love and loyalty, Peter is now re-established as an apostle—not as the head apostle, but as an apostle like the others.

The love that Peter confesses for Jesus brings him two things: a task to accomplish and a cross to bear. The task is represented by the words: "Tend my sheep." If Peter loves Jesus, he must show it by dedicating his life to serving the sheep and lambs of Jesus' flock. We prove our love for Jesus by our way of loving others. The cross is represented by the words: "...when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. According to traditions from sources other than the Bible, Peter really did die for Jesus. He was led to a cross, but he asked to be hung

upside down because he did not deserve to die in the same manner as his Lord. Love always comes with responsibility and with sacrifice. In spite of his initial failure, Peter's love got the better of his fear. He carried out his responsibility and made the ultimate sacrifice.

The Word of God assures us that Jesus returned to life as he promised he would. He returned literally and physically. We can count on this truth. The Word also asks us to take a stand in regard to Jesus. As he did with Peter, Jesus asks each of us, "Do you love me?" What will your answer be?