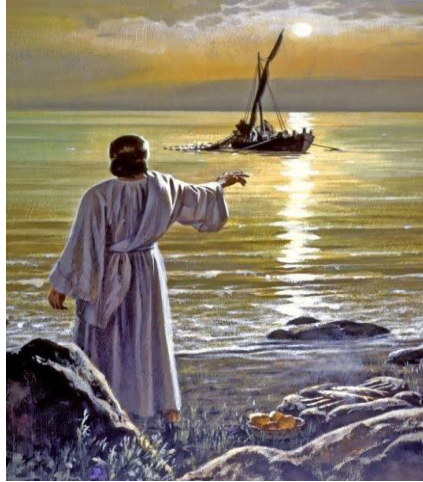


Sermon – May 1, 2022
“Follow Me”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: John 21:1-19

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry on this mission field with you. Amen

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

We continue during the season of Eastertide to look at Jesus' resurrection and what it means for us today. The scripture reading this morning describes the third appearance of Jesus after his resurrection. We have heard the words read this morning, but let me put some of this event into my own words and share them with you. Peter and some of the disciples are by the sea waiting for Jesus, and Peter stands up and says, "I am going fishing." And the others with him agree that fishing is a good idea and respond that they will go with him. We should get the idea that this group of disciples might be considering returning to the familiar vocation they enjoyed before they met Jesus. Peter is leading them and they are following, but they may not be going where Jesus is leading. Notice that Peter does not say, "I think Jesus is leading me to return to fishing." The disciples get into the boat and all night they fish the sea, working the nets, rowing, seeking fish, and there are none for them to catch. The sun comes up, the time for catching fish ends, and this crew of weary fishermen is headed back to the shore with no catch. We should recall an earlier fishing trip when after a night of fishing with no catch, Jesus taught from the boat and afterwards instructed

them to put out into the deep water for a catch. As they approach shore, they can see someone is standing on the shore, and we as readers of the Gospel are told it is Jesus, while the disciples in the boat are yet to recognize him. Jesus calls out to them while they are not far from him and asks if they have any fish. Remember, God never asks us a question to get information from us, but to teach. Those in the boat answer, “No.” Jesus tells them to cast the net to the right side of the boat and you will find some. They obey, cast the net, and it is filled with large fish! John recognizes the person on the shore as Jesus. Peter cannot wait to get to Jesus and dresses, jumps into the water, and makes his way to Jesus. John and the others bring the boat and fish to shore and then join Jesus and Peter. Jesus tells them to bring some of the fish they have caught, and Peter goes alone and brings the catch. Peter is eager to obey Jesus. Then they sit down and enjoy a meal that is cooking over a charcoal fire. We should remember that the last time there was a charcoal fire present in John’s Gospel; it was the night when Peter three times denied he knew Jesus.

After the meal, the other disciples fade from view and Jesus focuses his attention on Peter. Jesus addresses Peter by his formal name, “Simon son of John.” Now in my childhood years, when I heard “John Churchwell Wright,” I knew something very important was going to follow the use of my formal name. Jesus uses Peter’s formal name, not the name he had given him when they first met, but the name Peter had heard all of his life until he met Jesus, “Simon son of John.” Jesus has Peter’s full attention, and he asks Peter, “Do you love me more than these?”

We have to decide what Jesus means by the word “these” in his question. Two good options are either the fish and boat or the other disciples. Since the other disciples have faded from view and the focus has been on the catch of large fish that Peter brought to shore, the fish and boat, or a life as a fisherman, most likely is the meaning of the word “these.” Jesus is asking Peter which he loves more, Jesus or the former life he had as a fisherman, the life he has led other disciples back to this night, the life that he has known, the security he has had. Peter’s response to Jesus is “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” Peter chooses Jesus. Whatever the word “these” might refer to, Peter declares he loves Jesus. Peter declares before all present that he loves Jesus. Jesus then tells Peter to tend his sheep. We should not make too much of the word variation that Jesus uses here between tending and shepherding the sheep as both words point to the same idea. Jesus is telling Peter to care for those who believe in Jesus. Jesus then asks Peter a second question, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” No comparison this time for Peter to consider, just a question of whether he loves Jesus. Peter’s reply is the same: “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus tells Peter to tend his

sheep. Then Jesus asks Peter a third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” The charcoal fire burns, the other disciples are quiet. Peter remembers his three denials of Jesus by a different charcoal fire. Peter is hurt by the third question. Jesus was denied three times by Peter and abandoned. Yet Peter now declares a third time that he loves Jesus, saying, “Yes Lord you know that I love you.” Three times Peter denied he knew Jesus, three times he has now declared his love for Jesus, and three times Jesus tells Peter to care for Jesus’ sheep. Jesus ends their discussion by telling Peter to “Follow me.” When Jesus called the disciples in John’s Gospel, Peter is not asked by Jesus to follow him. Peter is welcomed by Jesus and Jesus changes Simon’s name to Cephas or Peter, but there is no “Follow me,” extended to Peter in that meeting in John’s Gospel. Now, after Peter’s denial of Jesus and his declaration of love for Jesus, Jesus tells Peter to “Follow Me.” Jesus summons a restored Peter, who has now set aside the three denials and instead declared his love for Jesus, to follow him and, as he follows, to care for Jesus’ sheep. In love, Peter is to follow Jesus and as he does, he is to care for Jesus’ sheep, those who will be caught in the net of relational love that will surround Peter. Peter has been reminded of the loving relationship that Jesus has for Peter and has invited him into it once again. Jesus loves the Father and the Father loves the son. Peter has been invited again into this loving relationship through Jesus’ questions. Jesus’ love for Peter has remained steadfast, never wavering, through denial and even to death on the cross. Peter has been renewed by Jesus’ questions or reminder of Peter’s love for Jesus, and in response to that love, Jesus has asked Peter to follow him even to Peter’s own death.

There is a story that circulates in the church about Peter’s death. The story holds that when persecution of Christians began in Rome, Peter had the opportunity to flee, and he takes advantage of that moment, leaving Rome for the safety of other cities. On the way out of Rome, Peter meets and recognizes Jesus who is going the other way into the city. Peter stops and asks Jesus where he is going. Jesus’ reply is that he is going to die in Peter’s place again. Jesus’ love is steadfast. The story holds that when Peter hears Jesus’ reply and understands again the love Jesus has for him, he turns and follows Jesus back into Rome and goes to his own death. Now the story is not scripture, but it does illustrate the point that Peter, in his love for Jesus, decides to follow Jesus even unto his own death. Peter’s commitment is total. Peter will lovingly lead Jesus’ sheep with Jesus directing him until the end of his life.

The questions are the same for us, for any who would seek to follow Jesus. We need to ask ourselves, “Do we love Jesus?” If we do, we are to shepherd Jesus’ sheep. We are to be those, who

with Christ in us, are seeking to follow Jesus by letting him direct our steps so that we might be led to others whom Jesus is seeking. Like the call from the shore to the disciples to cast the net on the other side of the boat, we are to look to Jesus and not our own understanding for his direction as we, in love of Jesus, follow him into his mission. As we work in Jesus' mission, we are to catch people in our own nets of relational love that we have cast at Jesus' direction, and then care for those we find caught in those nets. We are to be nurturing people into a deepening relationship with Christ. We are to be those who, out of love for Jesus, follow him, grow into his image, love others, care for them, and help them to grow into mature Christians. Jesus is at work in this community. We saw this repeatedly in the Good News Club this past year as children heard the Good News and became open to the transforming love of Christ. Jesus is at work all around us in our neighborhoods, among our friends, among our families, among those we work with, and even those we pass in the strivings of our daily lives. We are to be a people who love Jesus, follow him into his mission, and as we go, grow into the image of Christ. If we love Jesus, we also will be invited into his mission to all people. Let's ask ourselves the questions Jesus asked Peter: "Do we love Jesus more than these? Do we love Jesus? Do we love Jesus?" If we love Jesus, then we are to follow him right here, right now, and at his direction, obediently casting our nets of relational love wherever he directs, and lovingly caring for those who are caught. We are to move beyond hoping for Jesus to bring people into the doors of the church. We are to be those who are out in the world, directed by Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, going to and loving those Jesus loves. We are to be the body of Christ to all the world, starting right here right now. Do we love Jesus? Let us prepare our hearts this morning to commune with Jesus, to listen for his voice as we join him at his table, and then to go forth and follow Jesus into the world.

Pray with me: Lord Jesus, we ask for our eyes to be opened to see where you are at work. We ask that you would open our ears to hear your directions. We ask that we would declare our love for you by casting our nets of relational love into the places you direct, and that we would lovingly tend those caught in the nets of your love through the love we extend in the name, power, and strength of Jesus Christ. Amen