

# Starting over ...

23 April 2023

## INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

I wonder if you've ever done something really **bad**?

And how did you **felt** about it?

And what **Jesus** might think about it?

Peter had let Jesus down in a big way. When Jesus was arrested by the police, Peter tried to keep himself out of trouble by saying that he didn't even know Jesus. Peter didn't help his friend Jesus at all in his moment of need and only thought about himself.

After Jesus rose from the dead, he met up with Peter ... I wonder what Jesus said to him ...?

Jesus didn't yell or get angry. But he did talk to Peter quite seriously.

And he **forgave** him. How do we know this? Because he gave Peter a new job – an important job – a job that you only give to someone you can trust.

So Peter got a **second chance**. Jesus still wanted to be his friend. And Peter became a brave leader in the church ... he made a fresh start.

**And Jesus wants us to forgive people too when they let us down.**

**It's a really hard thing to do but that's one of the signs that we follow Jesus.**

## BIBLE READING

### ***Psalm 116:1-9 (responsively)***

I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;  
he heard my cry for mercy.

**Because he turned his ear to me,  
I will call on him as long as I live.**

The cords of death entangled me,  
the anguish of the grave came over me;  
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.

**Then I called on the name of the Lord:  
'Lord, save me!'**

The Lord is gracious and righteous;  
our God is full of compassion.

**The Lord protects the unwary;  
when I was brought low, he saved me.**

Return to your rest, my soul,

for the Lord has been good to you.  
**For you, Lord, have delivered me from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling,**  
that I may walk before the Lord  
in the land of the living.

### ***John 21:1-22, 24-25***

Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two other disciples were together. 'I'm going out 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.

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. He called out to them, 'Friends, haven't you 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!' Peter wrapped his outer garment round himself 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 metres. 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.' So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153 in all, 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.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you 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 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. Very truly I tell you, 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!'

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. When Peter saw him, he asked, '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.' This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

### MESSAGE Starting over ...

In the AFL, the team that I support is **Hawthorn** who were very good 8–10 years ago. Since then they've been in steep decline and are sitting dead last on the ladder so far this year. The polite term is that they are in **rebuild** mode, which seems to be an excuse for losing nearly every match. They are **starting over** ... but for how long will supporters and the business minds at Hawthorn tolerate failure? I guess time will tell.





Meanwhile, Liz and I are proud grandparents of a new granddaughter named Georgina born nearly two weeks ago now. She is very cute. But she and her Mum Helen have been struggling with breastfeeding, meaning that Helen was getting sore and baby Georgina wasn't getting the milk she needed. It needed an experienced midwife to come alongside Helen to encourage her and to help her **start over** with a slightly different technique.

Now Mum and baby are doing much better.

I've called today's message '**starting over**' because it's mostly about what Jesus does to help Peter start over again after some much publicised failures.

In some ways it's an odd way to end this Gospel because Peter hasn't featured very much, unlike in the other Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke where he's often the spokesperson for the disciples.



Many commentators view this last chapter in John as a later addition, since the Gospel seems to reach a climax and fitting conclusion at the end of chapter 20 with Thomas' confession of the risen Jesus as Lord and God, and Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples and sending them out into the world to carry on the ministry of Jesus.

But perhaps this final chapter is placed there quite deliberately to show that it wasn't an easy transition for the disciples and there was every possibility that the movement that started under Jesus would fall in a heap after his death.

Following the resurrection appearances of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and then to the gathered disciples and his commissioning of them, it's a little surprising to find several of the disciples back in Galilee and back fishing.

Why were they there? and what were they doing? While Jesus has indeed risen, he's not the same as before. He appears somewhat randomly and unexpectedly, and is no longer leading the band of disciples from village to village. Jesus' role had changed ... as had the role of the disciples.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John, the disciples head back to Galilee, where their adventure with Jesus began ... but also where their past was lived and where their families, friends and livelihoods were. They were going back to their roots to **start over**, to reconnect, and, perhaps at the insistence of their wives and partners, to earn some money to support their families.

For Peter, James and John it meant a return to fishing ... which involved hard work and sweat ... but the beginning of a vibrant new religious movement? It didn't look anything like that yet.



In John's conclusion to his amazing story about the Word of God who came and dwelt among us bringing light and life, it all seems fairly mundane and ordinary. Peter, James and John, Thomas and Nathanael and two others go out fishing. They fish all night but catch nothing. Their initial attempt at life after Jesus is clearly not going well – toiling all night with no catch of fish.

Then a mysterious figure on the shore says put down your nets on the right side of the boat and you'll find some.

And they do! **Lots of fish!** 153 to be precise.



This story has several echoes of the **calling** of these same fishermen at the start of Jesus' ministry, as told in the Gospel of Luke, where something very similar happens. On that occasion, they also fish all night with no success before Jesus suggests that they let down their nets one more time. If we're alert to this connection we might think that John's story is a **fresh calling** to discipleship, a **new mission** and a **new beginning**.

But it's also about failure and struggle and trying to do things in our own way that isn't fruitful or productive. I wonder where we might be struggling?

Where might we need to listen to the voice of wisdom calling out to us?



As often in the Gospel of John, though, we're invited to see beyond the 'sign' to the deeper truth it points to. When the disciple John sees the figure on the shore, he makes that deeper connection – hey guys, it's the **Lord!** It's **Jesus!**

Peter – always the impulsive one – dives in and swims the 100 metres to the shore where Jesus is waiting to greet them. The others follow in the boat and unload the large catch of fish.

A night of relying only on their own resources has yielded nothing, but with a little help from Jesus, they suddenly catch an **abundance** of fish.

When they all make it to shore, they find Jesus sitting by a campfire with some fish and bread already cooking.

It's all very **ordinary** ... but it's also **spine-tingling**.

Who is this? they think, but don't dare to ask.



As Jesus shares the bread and fish with them, we are reminded of the earlier story of the feeding of the 5000 with the same elements of bread and fish. That story is closely linked to **Communion** in this Gospel – and how Jesus is **the bread of life** who satisfies our deepest hunger. It's also similar to another resurrection story in the Gospel of Luke where the

disciples on the road to Emmaus only recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread. So there is a strong connection between sharing the bread of Communion and recognising the presence of the risen Jesus with us.

Here, the disciples **know** it's Jesus but there's also an element of **doubt**, features of other resurrection stories as well.

What's going on?

In keeping with those other stories, the disciples struggle to immediately recognise Jesus. He's **different**.

Has his appearance changed?

Has his manner changed?

Why is he sitting by a fire?

The next part of the story may provide some clues. The last time that Peter was sitting around a fire was the fateful night when Jesus was arrested and Peter denied



even knowing Jesus – three times.

Now he was sitting round another fire with Jesus again present.

Awkward doesn't quite cut it.

Embarrassment, shame, deep disappointment may be rising up in Peter after his earlier failures.

Jesus takes him aside and they have a chat.



Peter, do you love me more than these others?

Lord, you know that I love you.

Feed my lambs.

Peter, do you love me?

You know that I love you.

Look after my sheep. This is the task I'm calling you to Peter.

Peter, do you love me? It's excruciating for Peter.

It's replaying his three denials of Jesus.

But there's something else happening ... **grace, forgiveness, healing.**

Jesus is gently restoring Peter and helping him start over, helping him become the pastoral leader that he was destined to be. Jesus is giving him a **fresh start** and a **fresh challenge** – to share in the ministry of Jesus, who is the Good Shepherd.

It will be costly for Peter, taking him into places and situations he'd rather not go. But at the heart of it is Peter's deep love for Jesus.

The final invitation goes back to Peter's original call ... **Follow me**, says Jesus.

Notice how Jesus doesn't rebuke Peter or draw attention to his past failures ... Peter is well aware of these and doesn't need reminding.

Instead, Jesus gently draws him back to what is central and core – love for one another – and sets him on a new path.

When Peter sees John following them, he asks Jesus about **John's** future.

Without fobbing him off, Jesus basically says not to worry about John and what **he** might be called to do. It's enough for Peter to follow Jesus without worrying about anyone else.

As for John, he too will be a witness for Jesus and as we know, will start his own community of faith with its own distinct theology that comes through the Gospel of

John. His path will complement that of Peter who will be a key leader in the emerging Christian movement.

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For both of these leaders – as well as for us – the core calling is to **follow Jesus**. There will be roadblocks and failures, challenges and disappointment along the way, but we are also promised that Jesus will be with us on the journey to give us grace and the encouragement to keep going.



Jesus will come to us through God's **Spirit** who will remind us of what Jesus taught. This is one of the important messages in Jesus' long teaching at the Last Supper that features in chapters 14–17 of this Gospel and that we will explore over the next few weeks.

Another lesson from the interchange with Peter and Jesus is that we're not to be **envious** of other Christians and their ministries. It's easy to look over our shoulder at what other churches are doing and to become discouraged. Other faith communities may appear to be bigger in number, to be attracting more young people, to be successful in ways that we are not.



But Jesus doesn't encourage us to focus on those comparisons. We may learn from others, but not envy them. Instead, we're to be **faithful** to the calling **we've** received.

At the core of the call to follow Jesus, to be his faithful disciples, is the call to **love** ... to love God and to love Jesus.

To love one another and to love our neighbour.

What does this love look like?

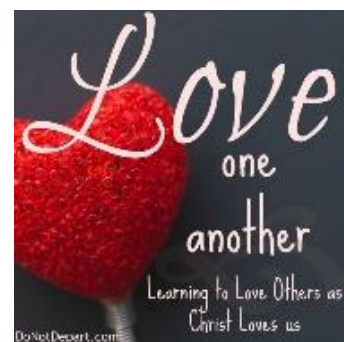
In the case of Jesus it means laying down one's life for one's friends.

It means offering grace, hope and forgiveness even when they're not deserved.

It means gently restoring those who have let us down.

It means going out into the world even though we don't know exactly what will happen.

Jesus stands on the shore of our life calling out to us.



*The decision to follow Jesus is one that we each need to make every day.*