

Eyewitness to Easter Part 1

Over the next seven Sundays we are going to take a closer look at some of the main figures in the story of Jesus' arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. You've heard of these people, but by Easter our hope is you will have a better understanding of each of them.

If you read all four of the gospels, you'll find that Peter is one of the first four called to be disciples of Jesus. When we first meet him he is called by his Hebrew name, Simon bar Jonah. He and his brother Andrew were fisherman from Bethsaida, a small village on the North side of the Sea of Galilee. They were living in Capernaum a few miles away and making a living, along with James and John, the sons of Zebedee who were partners with them in their fishing business. According to the gospel accounts, Peter was married and had a home in Capernaum. Ordinary, hardworking fishermen, these were salt of the earth Galileans. They didn't have much use for the high-toned folks from Jerusalem and the Jerusalem crowd looked down on the folks from the Galilee with their country accent. These were Jesus' kind of people. In fact, while Jesus was raised in Nazareth, he had moved to Capernaum and was making this his home base for ministry. This may not have been the spot we would have chosen to base the ministry of the Savior of the world. Wouldn't an urban center like Jerusalem have been better? But remember, he started out in Bethlehem, fled to Egypt as a refugee and then grew up in Nazareth, a place whose reputation was so dicey that one future disciple asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Based on the gospel accounts, it seems Peter may have had a couple of early encounters with Jesus, the first a result of the prompting of his brother, Andrew. Andrew had become a follower of John the Baptist and was standing near John when Jesus walked by and John the Baptist said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Andrew followed Jesus and after spending the day with him, went to find his brother telling him, "**We have found the Messiah.**" **John 1:41**

Thank God for Andrew! Thank God for a brother. Thank God for whoever it was that came to you and announced, "We have found the Messiah. Come meet him!" Thank God for that person, parent, grandparent, friend, pastor, teacher, youth pastor that told you, "I've found the one you've been looking for! Come meet Jesus!

Peter may have been hesitant at first, wondering what kind of crazy movement his brother Andrew was getting into now since there were all kinds of movements and wanna-be Messiahs around. First John the Baptist in his camel hair suit and now a rabbi from Nazareth?

Andrew comes shouting to Peter, “We have found the Messiah. I know it sounds crazy but I’m telling you, this is the One.” Oral Roberts used to say, “You know that you know that you know.” Andrew knew. Have you found Him? Do you know? Have you found The One, the one that can set you free, forgive your sins, bring hope, give you a new start, a new life, do the impossible? Andrew knew. The certainty and excitement in his voice apparently convinced Peter and together the brothers go to meet Jesus. When they find him Jesus looked at Peter and said, **“You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas (which when translated is Peter).” John 1:42** So what’s his name? Simon is his Hebrew name. Cephas is Aramaic and Peter is Greek and both words or names mean “Rock.”

He’s got a new name, at least a new nickname, and more than a new name he is about to find a new mission, a new life. One day after this introduction Jesus walks along the shore of the Sea of Galilee while Peter and Andrew are fishing in their boats. **“Follow me and I’ll make you fishers of men.”** They followed and watched as Jesus taught and healed the sick. Jesus even came home to Peter’s house for dinner one day. Peter’s mother in law was sick and Jesus healed her and she got up and fixed dinner for them. When people heard Jesus was at Peter’s house, they brought the sick to him and Jesus healed all that were brought to him, in Peter’s own house! What was going through Peter’s mind as he watched? The blind seeing, the lame walking, the demon possessed set free. Maybe Andrew was right. Maybe Jesus is the Messiah!

One morning after a long night of fishing Peter and Andrew are cleaning their nets. They had caught nothing. As they’re working Jesus shows up and a crowd begins to gather. Jesus asks Peter if he can use his boat and they push out a little way from the shore and Jesus teaches the people. After the crowd left, Jesus suggests to Peter that he throw the nets out one more time. You have to imagine Peter is thinking, “Listen, you’re a carpenter and a preacher, I’m a fisherman. Stay in your lane, Rabbi.” Peter says, “We fished all night and caught nothing, but because you say so, I’ll throw out the nets one more time.” When he did, they caught such a large number of fish their nets began to break and they had to call for James and John to come help them. They filled both boats so full the boats began to sink. To Peter it was a miracle, a sign. Luke tells us, **“When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man.’” Luke 5:8** It was Peter’s confession, his surrender to Jesus, his moment of being all in. “Lord, in the very place where I thought I was in charge, where I knew what to do, in that place, that arena, I realize now you should be in control. I give

up, I surrender my life to you, I'm yours Lord." Jesus said to him, **"Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.**" **Luke 5:10-11.** They followed him before, temporarily leaving their nets. This time they pulled their boats out of the water, left everything and followed him. Sold out. All in. Maybe this was one of those "...and the check was in the mailbox for the exact amount!" moments. It was Jesus saying "trust me, follow me and I'll take care of the rest." Maybe it was enough fish so they could sell them and all four afford to walk away from the boats and nets and follow Jesus. Either way, Peter would follow the Lord.

There was nothing in his past that could have prepared Peter for what he experienced as he followed Jesus over the course of the next three years. Lepers cleansed, blind eyes opened, the deaf made to hear, a little daughter and a widow's son raised from the dead. Twice he saw Jesus feed thousands of hungry people with a few loaves and fish. Peter even walked on water in the Sea of Galilee in the midst of a storm. There were miracles and then there were the moments that Peter couldn't understand, like when Jesus insisted on going through Samaria, a place where no self-respecting Jew would set foot. He didn't just pass through Samaria, he stopped and talked to a Samaritan woman at the well and offered her living water! He ate with tax collectors and sinners, he commended the faith of a Roman Centurion, a Roman! One of the occupiers no less!

Peter found himself drawn into something of an inner circle. It was Peter, James and John that were invited to accompany Jesus to the top of a mountain where they saw a glimpse of his divine glory. After some especially difficult teaching of Jesus the bible says, **"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."** **John 6:66.** It was too tough, too demanding. Jesus looked at the twelve and asked **"You do not want to leave too, do you?"** It was Peter who responded, **"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."** **John 6:68**

Thank you Peter for saying what we need to say today. "To whom shall we go?" Where else can we go or to whom can we turn? No one else can offer us eternal life. No one else offers forgiveness of sins. No one else can save us and make us clean and whole again. No one else can take the broken pieces of our lives and make a brand new life. No one but Jesus!

On another occasion while at Caesarea Philippi, on the ruins of an ancient temple where sacrifices had been made to pagan gods, Jesus asked this question. **"Who do people say I am?"** The disciples answered, "Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, others say one of the

ancient prophets come back to life.” Jesus said, **“But what about you? Who do you say I am?”** It was Peter once again who answered, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Matthew 16:16** Way to go Peter. Two for two!

We got the idea for this series from a book by Daniel Darling. He writes concerning Peter, “He didn't understand everything. Peter couldn't imagine the Messiah king as a crucified, arrested Lord. He didn't like Jesus’ prediction of death and resurrection for Himself, hardly the career trajectory of a triumphant conqueror. In fact, not long after his declaration of faith, Peter was rebuked by Jesus for opposing the journey to the cross. Peter's vision of God's Kingdom involved blood, yes, but surely it would be Roman blood spilled under foot as the righteous King put down the Roman overlords. He could not see ahead the blood of the One he loved splattered across an ugly instrument of torture and death. But make no mistake: Peter’s open declaration of Jesus as God's son was not the safe choice. It defied the religious leaders. Soon the crowds would be howling for Jesus’ death. And one day this simple declaration would make Peter an enemy of Rome.”

Peter made this bold proclamation, this strong confession as to who Jesus really is. Jesus told Peter, **“Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it.” Matthew 16:17-18** Can you think of any higher praise? I mean, Peter seems to be hitting it out of the park to use a baseball metaphor. Peter the rock, but then comes this episode, this massive fail. It is recorded in all four of the gospels. You can’t tell the Easter story without telling of Peter’s denial of Christ.

The week of his crucifixion the disciples arrive with Jesus in Jerusalem. There is the triumphal entry with crowds cheering, laying palm branches on the road down the Mount of Olives. Rumors fly about a plot to arrest Jesus, to put him to death and even to kill Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Jesus didn’t help matters by chasing merchants out of the temple area and talking about the temple being destroyed in the not too distant future.

Jesus eats the Passover meal with the disciples and tells them one of them will betray him. Peter says, “It won’t be me Lord.” **“Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.’” Luke 22:33-34**

Peter can't believe it. They leave and go to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him to pray. Suddenly, the soldiers are there with torches and swords, with Judas leading the way. With a kiss he betrays Jesus into the hands of the temple guards. The disciples scatter, but Peter and John follow at a distance and manage to get into the courtyard of the High Priest where the illegal trial of Jesus is being held. Peter wants to be close, wants to help perhaps, but while standing near a fire to warm himself a servant girl says, "You're one of those with Jesus." Peter tells her she is mistaken. "I don't know him" he says. A little later someone else says, "this man is one of them." "No I am not!" Luke says an hour later another said, "No doubt, this guy is a Galilean and was with him." Peter swears with an oath "You don't know what you're talking about." Luke records, **"Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him, 'Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly." Luke 22:60-62**

Three times he denied the Lord. Disowned him, Luke says. Broken, humiliated, humbled, contrite, sorrowful, repentant, Peter runs away and wept bitterly. We don't know how he spent the next couple of days as Jesus is crucified and buried. Peter must have expressed his sorrow and regret to the other disciples. Of course, they had all fled. They are gathered together on Sunday morning when suddenly some of the women come running in, led by Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus' mother. The tomb is empty and an angel said Jesus was risen! Mark's gospel tells us there was a special message just for Peter. A man dressed in a white robe tells Mary and the others with her, **"Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He has risen! But go and tell his disciples and Peter..." Mark 16:6-7**

"And Peter." What a sense of relief Peter must have felt. "Jesus included me! He still has a place and purpose for me even though I failed. He's forgiven me!" Can you hear it? "And Phil." You failed, disowned him, let him down. "Go tell the disciples at Carbondale, and Phil...and insert your name." He'll forgive if you ask! Peter and John run to the tomb and find it just as the women had described. Later that day, Jesus appears to the disciples while they are gathered behind locked doors and with convincing proof eliminates any doubt concerning his resurrection. Jesus is alive, risen! He is Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Peter, the one who confessed that, is also the one who denied and disowned Jesus, but failures don't have to stop us or defeat us. Peter failed and yet Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 indicates Jesus

met personally with Peter after the resurrection. Jesus told him, “**Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat but I’ve prayed for you that your faith won’t fail. After you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.**” **Luke 22:31** Peter, don’t let this be the end, let it be the beginning.

Can you imagine how Peter felt every time he heard a rooster crow? Every morning. He could either remember his failure, or he could remember Jesus’ forgiveness, his mercy, his message, “I’ve prayed for you Peter that your faith won’t fail.” Every time he heard a rooster, maybe he thought, “I know I could fail again, so I’m going to lean on Jesus and depend on him. That rooster reminds me that Jesus is praying for me. Jesus is giving me another chance!”

Failure didn’t stop him. Peter stands before all of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and tells them the Jesus they crucified is risen from the dead and He is Messiah and Savior and Lord. He’ll never disown Jesus again. Peter had told Jesus he was willing to go to prison and even to die for Jesus. He finally did both as he was executed for the faith in Rome. Peter, the fisherman, the disciple, the one who after all that time with Jesus still failed him and denied Jesus but in the end, the one who was forgiven, persuaded and all in!

Some of you have let your failures, your mistakes haunt you, hinder you. Peter disowned Jesus, denied him three times, failed him and yet Jesus forgave him, restored him. In John 21 he asks Peter if he loved him. “You know I love you Jesus.” “Then feed my sheep, shepherd the flock.” And then one more time Jesus says to Peter, “**Follow me!**” Someone here today, you’ve served him and loved him but you failed him, but Jesus is saying to you today, one more time, “Follow me.” There is forgiveness, there is restoration, there is still a purpose and a calling for you. Jesus has prayed for you so your faith won’t fail. Say yes to following Jesus today!