

SIX IMPOSSIBLE THINGS

FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC

26 APRIL 2026

JOHN 21:4-17

Our 2nd Scripture, John 21:4-17, takes place following the appearance to unlucky, doubting Thomas. Having made their way from Jerusalem to Galilee, a group of disciples have, at Peter's suggestion, been fishing all evening.

Listen for the Word of God:

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 6 He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. 7 That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he had taken it off, and jumped into the sea. 8 But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them, and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16 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." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the 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."

*This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

Let me tell y'all what, this morning, I thought I'd be preaching about this morning: trash bins. Join me in a bit of world-building. Anyone who is currently raising a teenager is likely acquainted with the scene, let's call it "the suburban triptych." Panel one: parents scrubbing up after dinner while the teenagers lounge in place like the disciples at Leonardo's last supper, each somehow taking up at least two chairs and similarly frocked in blankets. A call rings out over the sound of clanging pans, perhaps meant to

inspire action (now this could be any of our three, but I'll pick on Brigham, since she's up there running sound this morning): *Brigham, take out the trash?*

The response is immediate, if distracted: "on it." The clanging continues. Jen is now wiping down the counters. The lounging teens have relocated from the countertop seats to the actual table, spread before phones and Chromebooks. "Brigham," the call echoes, "take out the trash?" A response comes — bafflingly, in the present tense, though the retort matches neither the action nor the subject, "Bruh, I am."

Does this sound familiar? Can you guess what happens next?

The third panel: Jen and I are standing in the kitchen and nearly everything is tidied up. But there's the trash. It's taunting us. The bin is a mere 50-yards away, certainly one of us could do it, but it's become a matter of principle. The inquiry is becoming more ... let's say ... urgent, and now we adopt biblical tones:

"BRIGHAM! IF YOU LOVE US YOU WILL TAKE OUT THIS TRASH." The response somehow comes from further away, though neither of us clocked the move to the couch in the next room. "I TOLD YOU I AM." Then, perhaps some minutes or hours later, a faint rustle and the slowest footsteps imaginable head for the kitchen.

The trash goes out.

In almost all of my sermons there are embedded at least two sermons: the one I thought I was preaching and the one that slipped through my consciousness. This morning I'm drawing your attention to the two sermons. The first one, the one that got me thinking about trash bins, centers around repetition.

Feed my lambs.
Tend my sheep.
Feed my lambs.

How familiar, the need to be reminded; how deeply human. Any educator will tell you that repetition builds mastery and boosts confidence. Repetition moves us toward knowledge: what *was* was strange and unfamiliar can become, with a little repetition, a habit, a way of life.

Like my mother reminding me to always look left when crossing the street or Jen reminding Brigham to leave the space cleaner than she found it, to cultivate an eye and a way of life that notices what needs doing.

In John 21 Jesus takes on the role of a parent, naming the disciples "children" in verse 5, and, a few verses later, by the Gospel's end, reminding them what they were meant to be doing this entire time. Not fishing, feeding. By the lakeside, over and over, Jesus prepares Peter — and by proxy the rest of Jesus' followers — for a world in which the

Lord will not always be physically present *with* those who love him. He reminds them of discipleship's chores.

Feed my lambs.
Tend my sheep.
Feed my lambs.

Repetition. That's the first sermon But as often happens in my writing something else began to nag 'round about page three. My second sermon emerged sooner and more clearly than any second sermon I've ever accidentally written.

Jesus repeats himself, but I think there's something beyond recall going on in our story, something that demands our attention and requires us to honestly assess ourselves through the actions of Peter.

The *actual* sermon this morning isn't about repetition, it's about grace. Both are important, but one won't take without the other.

In one of her conversations with the Queen of Hearts, the mad woman tells Alice that one should always practice of believing impossible things, "six impossible things by breakfast" to be specific.

In John 21 the impossible is not the problem. The disciples came to Galilee from Jerusalem, where they overcame doubt by touching, witnessing to, listening to, and eating with the risen Christ. There have been a bevy of impossibles in Peter's world, and there will be at least six more by the time he gets to the shore for breakfast. *He is risen indeed!*

Overfull nets, the roasting fish, another appearance. Peter and the disciples have seen incredible things. But they don't know what to do next. For all Peter's frenzy — after all he didn't just robe up to jump in the ocean, he was the first to take off running to the tomb (though the last to arrive, a telling psychological detail) — he'd been a bit unmoored since Easter Sunday...

...behind Peter's bravado there was the as-yet unresolved matter of Jesus' final night. Months before Jesus' death, Peter told Jesus that he would *lay down his life* for his friend, and then only days ago, when Jesus leaned over to wash Peter's feet, Peter had protested — he threw a full on fit — declaring that he would be the one who'd do the foot washing *thank you very much*. At Jesus' arrest, Peter'd cut off a man's ear in protest. In those hours, he'd been defensive and protective.

But later, warming by a charcoal fire, out of earshot of Jesus, Peter's defenses melted away. Jesus said Peter would deny him and Peter'd fallen out. But here he was. And this is the part where we ought to assess ourselves, whether or not we'd like to dwell on it.

“You are not also one of this man’s disciples,” asked woman warming nearby. Peter said, “I am not.” Moments later the question repeated. In the flickering darkness, Peter denied a second time. Finally the slave of the high priest inquired. Peter responded with one final, absolute “no.”

No.
No.
No.

I am not.
I am not.
I am not.

Occasionally as a teenager I would do something wrong. In response, either to hide my guilt or mitigate it, I would overcompensate in the extreme. Break an heirloom vase? I’d run around dusting the whole house in hopes that my mother wouldn’t notice. Bump the mailbox on my way out of the drive? The whole family is getting a free car wash, and for no particular reason I’ll paint the mailbox while I’m at it. The frenzy was a giveaway, pointing back in a haze of action toward whatever first went wrong. Like a chicken with my head cut off — y’all know the feeling — all action, energy, and momentum. Very little *thought*.

Picture John 21 again: Peter’s made it to Galilee with the disciples. Jesus had prepared him for discipleship without him, but all Peter could do was try to rustle up some funds fishing — and nude fishing at that.

Peter knew that Christ was risen, but he was eaten up with guilt.
He was a chicken with his head cut off.
He’d made big promises.
And then, even as Jesus was being interrogated by the Roman Governor,
Peter reneged on each one.

Now, with Jesus on the loose, holes in his hands and scars in his side, Peter didn’t know what to do.

Have you ever felt burdened by guilt, paralyzed by inertia, or fearful in the face of the unknown? Have you ever been unsure of where God is calling you, or, to be more precise, unsure that you’re the one for the job? This second sermon is for you — for us.

Now I imagine at this point in the sermon I probably need to remind you what we’re talking about. The first sermon was about repetition. This one is about grace. The two are connected by charcoal fires and a threefold question that echoes, I daresay repeats, across the millennia.

Peter was lost. He knew Jesus was risen, he just didn't know what to do with it. He needed assurance that he was still called — called in, though, and beyond his failure — and he needed to know that he had the mettle to live into that calling.

Easter comes and goes. What's next for Peter, what's next for us?

Never-mind six impossible things, my dad's loaf-about uncle Vernon used to tell him that a man could only truly be happy if he could find something to do after breakfast. Peter needed something to do, he needed to work through his failures, and to contribute to the Kingdom which he so earnestly hoped would soon come. He needed to hear the voice of the one he denied telling him that he was free.

Jesus didn't confront Peter with his failure, not directly. He didn't chastise him or demand a statement of apology or a perfect score on the Bible Bowl. For each "no" around that first charcoal fire, Jesus offered a counter proposal, a proposal centered around a second charcoal fire, this one a fire of provision, where Jesus was cooking for his erstwhile disciples: "*feed my sheep.*"

This is the grace of God. Meeting us right where we are, countering the fire of our guilt with the hearth of divine provision, and never, *never* allowing us to stay frozen where we were found. The commission that Peter received was a grace that accounted for the ways he'd missed the mark, and responded with purpose. It was grace that *provides*.

Which is nothing new in the story of God. The God who spun the world from nothing and walked with the first humans in the Garden, who kept covenant with a wandering people, and sent prophets to reorient their apostasy was made flesh in Jesus Christ. And since his incarnation the Son kept faith with the Father: providing, making whole, and moving folks on.

First there was Cana, where the the water overflowed into barrels of finest wine. And then there was the one loaf that became 5,000. The few fish that had multiplied on another shore, ensuring all who gathered were fed with a dozen baskets left over.

Jesus had been providing food and direction since the beginning, clearing the deck and then sending the disciples.

And here's where two sermons may just become one again. Because the truth of it is that Peter needed to not only hear that *he* was still loved despite all the intervening days. He needed to be reminded of what was meant to come next.

Grace came, as it does to us, in the form of a directive, a commission.

Feed my sheep.

The final scene of the Gospel reaches from Galilee to us. When the hallelujahs are over and the linen's all wrinkled, when we are crashing from the chocolate or too much bad

news, when we aren't quite sure what we're meant to get up to, there's a grace for our failures and a reminder. What does Easter ask of us?

feed my sheep.

The repetition is intentional. If it sounds too simple, or maybe even too overwhelming, too impossible to care for all those whom Jesus cares for, maybe it is. Maybe that's the point. It's an impossible way to live, but then again we've seen impossible. We belong to the impossible.

And we've been reminded, over and over and over, with the kind of repetition that builds knowledge and that becomes a way of life. This is the impossible world into which we are called, this is the world where we *practice* — the word choice is intentional — Christian faith.

Feed my sheep.

No qualifiers. No eye toward status, net worth, deservedness, or shared dogma. No regard for immigration status or political affiliation. *If you love me*, you who shout your "Indeeds" during this Easter season, then *feed my sheep*. When you've failed, when you've succeeded, when you don't know what to do next, get to it.

God will provide the grace, but that you're tasked with its indiscriminate distribution. Like the wine at Cana, the bread on the journey, and the fish on the seashore. Feed. Provide. And if you don't know what's next,

well, find a way and *feed my sheep*.

After Easter loving God is a work,
a grace you grab hold of.
Shepherd the Shepherd's sheep.
Care for them while he is away.
Protect the most vulnerable,
and ensure that none go hungry.

And trust that God, like our suburban tryptic, won't stop calling
until the job is done,
and the day has come,
when all are fed,
when everything is hallelujah,
and when Easter's promise
has been made real in Friday's world.

Beautiful things have happened in our world. Impossible things. That's the grace of God. Terrible things have happened too. That's the chaos of our world and the guilt that each of us has. Don't live there. Listen for the calling voice.

Take out the trash.
Clean up.
Do it again and again and again, until it becomes as natural as taking a breath.
This too is the grace of God.
By which all will be fed.

— *Leigh Stuckey*