

My family did a lot of camping when I was growing up. As we'd prepare for the trip, we'd pack up the tent and sleeping bags, stock the cooler with food for the weekend, make sure we had the necessary toiletries and change of clothes, and we'd stuff it all in the back of the van before heading out to some nearby state park. After our first few trips, we also got in the habit of packing rain gear because Lord knows if we were camping, the rain was coming. And not just any rain, but the hardest rain – torrential down pour rain. Thunder and lightning shaking the ground and forcing everyone to sleep in the van kind of rain. And there's a lot of reasons why rain can be a bit of a bummer on a camping trip, but for my sister and me, the biggest disappointment was the realization that there would be no campfire that night. And no campfire meant no s'mores. And that's just unacceptable.

My dad was the one who taught me different ways to build a fire. Each trip I would rack my brain to see if I should make a log cabin fire or more of a tepee style. It was fun and I have such great memories of time around the fire with my family. On one trip, the site we were at was covered with acorns, which isn't the greatest if you're sleeping in a tent on the ground. So we swept aside a small patch for the tent and I set about building the fire. After dinner, we were all gathered around the campfire and enjoying the rare non-rain night. My dad told us to grab a handful of acorns that we would throw one at a time into the fire. Each acorn represented something we were thankful for, something we hoped for, something we wished to change or do differently in our lives. And as the acorns landed in the fire, they would eventually burst and pop, almost as if whatever that acorn represented was being released into the world.

Throughout the Gospels, Peter is the disciple we hear about most frequently. Sometimes, it's because he's doing something incredibly faithful. Other times, it's because he's doing something that just makes you shake your head. And it's because of these latter times that we often hold Peter to a standard that, if we're honest, we would not wish to be subjected to ourselves. But Peter is, like all of us, trying to navigate this thing called faith. What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it mean to trust in Jesus' words? What does it mean to have faith in the promises Jesus makes and embodies? I think if we're honest, we don't really have any greater answers than Peter would have. Because faith is complicated like that. Faith means stepping into a mystery, not because we're certain, but because we believe that what we've heard and experienced about God is good and we wish to grow further into that goodness.

So our reading today takes place after the resurrection, of course. But even in a post-resurrection world, there are still questions of faith. What does it mean to be a follower of the resurrected Jesus? And even with the promise and hope of Easter, who are we as loved and redeemed children of God who have a past that is riddled with things we're not proud of? In

other words, what effect does who we've been have on who we are now, if it does at all? Can we truly celebrate the risen Christ, knowing what we know about ourselves?

I think that's the issue for Peter. From the boat, he recognizes Jesus on the shore. And when he swims up, Jesus is gathered around a charcoal campfire, which seems like such a strange detail to include. But in the Gospel of John, things like this are no accident. It's that charcoal fire that thrusts Peter into the complexity of his identity. Who is Peter now that Jesus has been raised? Which disciple is he? Is he the disciple who left everything to follow Jesus? Is he the one who first confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God? Is he the disciple who couldn't quite understand why Jesus had to die and in the moment he spoke against it, was called Satan? Is he the disciple who denied his Lord three times, while gathered around a similar charcoal fire? Now that Jesus is raised, who is Peter now?

It seems pretty clear, when you take in all of the similarities, what Jesus is trying to teach Peter here. Charcoal fire, a series of challenging questions, three chances to answer how he really feels about Jesus – it's Peter's redemption. And I think it's because Peter has been carrying around some acorns – some things he wishes were different about his life, especially in light of the resurrected Christ. It makes sense doesn't it? That Peter would carry his guilt and shame and regret for what he did while Jesus was on trial? But doesn't it also make sense that Jesus, who died and raided the gates of hell to set the people of God free from sin and death, and then was raised triumphantly over such powers – doesn't it make sense that Jesus would seek to lead Peter into the newness of life that the resurrection brings? That Jesus is helping Peter to see and know what it means to be a disciple after all the consequences of sin and death, like guilt, shame, and regret, have been overcome?

My friends in Christ, what Peter hears and what we must continue to hear, is that Christ is risen – He is risen, indeed! Life on this side of the resurrection means that we need not carry the weight of sin and death. Jesus is showing Peter and us that it's time to let go of such things. We can dwell on the sins of our past, live with guilt, shame, and regret, and endlessly twirl the would've, could've, should've in our minds. We can live with our arms so full of acorns that we can't possibly do anything else. Or we can remember that we are loved, we are forgiven, and brought into new life through Christ. We can remember that faith is not about certainty or perfection, because we will fall short time and time again. But rather faith is an ongoing growth and transformation, a belief that somehow, in spite of our past failures, God in Christ continually comes to us with grace upon grace and calls us to follow again. We can remember that we have a job to do. We can remember to carry on the work of Christ. Feed the sheep. Tend the lambs. And let the acorns go. Thanks be to God! Amen.