

Peter's familiar story: John 21:1-19

by [James A. Harnish](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

Fred Snodgrass made one mistake and the world never let him forget it. Snodgrass was playing center field for the New York Giants in the 1912 World Series against the Red Sox. The teams were tied in the tenth inning when a fly ball fell into Snodgrass's mitt—and he dropped it. The Red Sox won the series, and the error stuck with Snodgrass the rest of his life. Sixty-two years later, his *New York Times* obituary read: “Fred Snodgrass, 86, Dead; Ball Player Muffed 1912 Fly.”

That's the way we might have remembered Peter: “Simon Peter, Fisherman; Denied His Lord in 33 AD.”

The early Christians never forgot the night Peter muffed it. He was standing beside a charcoal fire outside the courtroom where Jesus was on trial when a servant girl recognized him as one of Jesus' followers. Peter denied knowing Jesus. He denied it a second and even a third time. Then he went out and wept over the biggest failure of his life.

That's where Peter's story would have ended if the risen Christ had not shown up. After Jesus' death, Peter decided to go back to his former occupation, back to the life he'd lived before Jesus gave him a new calling. “I'm going fishing,” he said, and the rest of the disciples went with him.

It sounds like a failed business venture. As the partners shut down the computers for the last time, they say to one another, “It was great while it lasted. We gave it our best shot. There's nothing left to do but try to get our old jobs back.” But Peter's effort to get back to his old job went from bad to worse. He and his friends spent the night fishing and caught nothing. Now he was a double failure; he had muffed it both as a disciple and as a fisherman.

Then, just after daybreak, a stranger appeared on the shore and told the weary fishermen to cast the net on the other side of the boat. Desperate, they did as he directed and suddenly hit a catch so big they couldn't pull it in.

For members of the early church, this story rekindled the memory of another night when Peter (then Simon Peter) had been casting his nets in vain throughout the night. Jesus appeared, got into Peter's boat and told him to "let down your nets." Suddenly the nets filled with fish, and Peter cried out, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Jesus responded, "From now on you will be catching people" (Luke 5:1-11), and turned a night of failure into the dawn of a new calling.

Now Jesus had been resurrected from the dead and was again calling out to Peter. This time, when Peter recognized the man on the shore as his Lord, he tried to cover himself up, just as Adam and Eve had tried to hide their nakedness from God after they muffed it in the garden. But Jesus joined Peter beside a charcoal fire—the same kind of fire around which Peter had denied his Lord—broke the bread, passed it around and asked Peter, "Do you love me?"

Three times Jesus asked. Three times Peter replied, "Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep." Jesus forgave Peter's failure, restored his identity and renewed his calling. It was the first day of the rest of Peter's life.

The early Christians couldn't forget Peter's story because they saw themselves in it. No matter how inspiring our first experience with Jesus, no matter how strong our sense of calling, we end up denying our Lord. Then we're tempted to say, "It was great while it lasted, but I might as well go back to fishing."

But morning comes and the risen Christ shows up where we least expect him. When we confront our naked failure, we discover that the love of God is deeper than our denial and the calling of God is stronger than our failure to live up to it.

In an Easter sermon given at Riverside Church in New York City, William Sloane Coffin said, "Christ is risen to convert us, not from this life to some other life, but from something less than life to the possibility of full life. . . . Easter is a demand not for sympathy with the crucified Christ, but a demand for loyalty to the resurrected one."

Members of the early Christian church knew Peter's story well. They knew how the vacillating, Jesus-denying Simon became Peter, how Jesus raised his calling to a whole new level and declared Peter to be the rock on which the church would be built. They knew Peter followed his Lord to a cross, and they dared to believe that Jesus would do the same for each of them: he would never give up on them.