

May 4, Easter 3C (John 21:1-19)

## **John tells us the mother of all fish stories.**

by [Katherine A. Shaner](#) in the [May 2025](#) issue

Published on April 28, 2025

“Follow me!” These words seem odd at the end of this week’s gospel reading.

Jesus has just asked Peter three times if Peter loves him, and after each of Peter’s affirmative responses, Jesus implores Peter, “Feed my sheep.” Then at the end of the reading, Jesus commands Peter to follow him. Can one tend sheep and follow another shepherd at the same time? The narrator in John’s Gospel seems to feel this strange juxtaposition of commands, too. John suggests that the second imperative (“Follow me!”) does not need immediate action. Rather, it is a foreshadowing of the end of Peter’s ministry; he will die a martyr’s death as Jesus did.

John does this often throughout the gospel. He tells the reader how to put Jesus’ words and actions into a larger framework of their own faith and action. For example, John tells readers that Jesus foreshadows his own death and resurrection in his conversations with the temple leadership after wreaking havoc on the merchants (2:22). John’s narrative voice is interpretively self-aware. Since some of Jesus’ words are clear only once we know the end of the story, John helps the reader interpret his stories.

Returning to John 21, this week’s reading starts with the story of Peter in the boat with Jesus, catching an enormous quantity of fish after a night of empty nets. This is familiar: Luke 5:1–11 tells a very similar story, in which Jesus commandeers Peter’s boat and the haul of fish threatens to sink it. What, you might ask, is the difference between these two stories?

Luke tells the story as the beginning of discipleship for Peter, James, and John. In Luke the enormous catch of fish explains how Peter met Jesus. The promise to “fish for people” is what convinces these new disciples to follow. By contrast, John tells us that this mother of all fish stories is Jesus’ third appearance to the disciples after his resurrection. In John the haul of fish is the source of a breakfast on the beach that

confirms Jesus' bodily resurrection. After all, ghosts don't eat fish.

But John seems keen to use this fish story to explain Peter's call after the resurrection rather than an origin story. I wish that John had explained Peter's behavior in the boat. Why in the world would he *put on* clothes to jump in the lake? Why was he naked in the first place? Instead, John chooses to explain this scene and the instructions to Peter as a post-resurrection call for building community.

During their breakfast chat, Jesus starts to talk about a time when his resurrection appearances will stop, a time when his absence will be keenly felt. Someone needs to tend to those who have come to depend on Jesus. Someone needs to guild a community of care and protection for the vulnerable gathered in Jesus' name. They need a new shepherd who can keep the sheep safe and secure, out of harm's way, or at least connected with each other.

Each time Jesus asks Peter to feed his sheep—to tend the growing community of followers—he reinforces community built out of love for Jesus. Peter even gets a little annoyed at Jesus' repetition, as if he thinks Jesus doesn't believe his love is real and true. Of course, Jesus has good reason for these questions. While Peter's words are true, his past actions have not always matched his words. Peter is the one who denied him three times in Pilate's house during his trial (John 18:15–18). Jesus was asking Peter to do something Peter had already fearfully declined to do. How easy it is to forget our fears in the face of triumph! How easy it is to faithfully promise loyalty!

Yet we know the end of both Jesus' story and Peter's. John, as our faithful narrator, uses this knowledge to show us that these fears can be overcome, that building community among the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the endangered fulfills faithful promises. John's Jesus redeems Peter with the reminder to readers that Peter's loyalty this time followed Jesus to death.

"Follow me!" is not an invitation for Peter to follow Jesus to the heights of power and privilege and luxury and potency. John's Jesus includes the invitation to follow as a foreshadowing of a different kind of call. Peter will help build a different kind of community—a beloved community—that for a time will resist imperial power structures. This invitation to follow, which John also extends to the readers, is an invitation to build community in a sea that seems empty, even as it teems with those needing a place to be called beloved.