

**Witnesses: 1. Friend (Peter)**  
**Matthew 26:69-75**  
**March 5, 2017**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

For the next six weeks, we will focus on the persons who were surrounding the cross or watched as Jesus was on his way to being crucified. And we will look for the answer to this question: What is it in the lives of these people that speaks to our lives today? I think we will find their stories are interconnected with our stories. They were witnesses.

We all have been witnesses to something that has changed us. Some of you will never forget December 7, 1941, *a day that will live in infamy*, or the day in November 1963 when President Kennedy was shot, or the moment you heard the Challenger exploded after takeoff, or 9/11. Over 60% of Americans were watching live as the terrorist attacks brought down the World Trade Center towers. If you were alive that day, you remember where you were when you heard the news. You remember what you were feeling even if you didn't understand what was happening. And the trauma of that day changed us. Last week, I was reading a study that found that even 16 years later, there are people who still experience anxiety, nightmares and difficulty with concentration as a result of their exposure to what they were watching and what has been replayed over and over again. That day changed us as a nation. Two thousand years ago, the Roman Empire used crucifixion for this very reason. A person would be nailed to a cross outside the gate of the city and left there to die – and often it took days for death to come. It was an act of torture and terror forced on everyone who entered the city. Rome was saying, "Don't mess with Rome. Do what we say or this will happen to you." And for those who watched and listened, they would never be the same.

Today, our focus is Peter and what it meant to be an ordinary disciple and friend of Jesus – and like any friend, one who fell short from time to time. We meet Peter in the first chapter of John's gospel. We read about the baptism of Jesus and how as Jesus leaves the Jordan River valley where he was baptized, two men begin following him. When Jesus realizes that he has followers, he asks, "What are you looking for?" And they say, "Wherever you are going." And Jesus says, "Come and see." One of the men was Andrew who then told his brother, Simon, "We have found the Messiah." And when Simon meets Jesus, Jesus takes one look at him and says, "**You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas.**" (When translated is Peter.) Simon becomes the first round draft pick, the chosen sought after leader. He's the franchise player around which the entire team of disciples will be built. Over the next three years, Peter will gain greater prominence. He is a man of action, living into the purpose Jesus has for him.

In John 6, Jesus is building this movement but what Jesus says is controversial and not all the disciples are ready to embrace Jesus' perspective and they begin falling away. They say, "Jesus, we thought you were the one but you now sound too extreme. We are going back to fishing." It is this defining moment for the disciples. Will this be one more failed movement or will this be the one that will change everything? There are twelve disciples how and Jesus asks, "**You do not want to leave too, do you?**" It is a loaded question. And Peter is quick to respond. He's the leader, and he comes to Jesus' defense. **Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.** Peter provides the answer you would expect from the team leader. Lord, we are with you. He pledges his undying allegiance.

In John 18, in the Garden of Gethsemane as the guards arrive to arrest Jesus, Peter is quick to react. He jumps to Jesus' defense, sword in hand and cuts off the ear of Malchus, servant of the

high priest. There is no question that Peter will fight to defend Jesus. Peter is always quick to act, to take the first step. He's the leader, the team captain. That evening when Jesus knelt to wash his disciples' feet, Jesus look to Peter who says, "Lord you cannot wash my feet. I won't let you. You are the guest, the most important person in this room. It's wrong for you to do this." But Jesus challenges Peter's thinking, "Unless you let me wash you, you will have no part of me." And Peter suddenly realizes this is about more than foot washing and he says, "Then wash all of me. My hands and my head because I'm all in. I am with you. I'm the leader. I'm your friend. **Lord, I will lay down my life for you.** Do you get a picture of the kind of disciple and friend that Peter was? For three years, he went everywhere with Jesus. He was ready to lead the way. He would do anything. But moments after Peter declares that he will lay down his life for Jesus, Jesus questions Peter's true allegiance. **"Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."**

Peter may have been the leader, this bold man of action, but his action would get ahead of his ability. His desire to be the first and the greatest would lead him to a place of denial and complete failure – not once or twice but three times. Can you imagine what Peter must have felt every time he heard a rooster crow? The guilt, the shame. When Jesus needed him the most – Peter failed. He went from first to worst. His final encounter with Jesus – and it's denial. What kind of legacy is that? How's that look on your resume? Nobody will want him on their team. In the moment of crisis, he crashes – and he's the best disciple, the first pick.

Last week, I was listening to a report on the Minnesota Twins. Last season (and most fans simply want to forget last season), the Twins were at the bottom of the major league, but when spring training begins it is always a time of optimism – maybe this could be the year. If the Chicago Cubs could win it all, it could happen. But then last week the Twins were shutout 19-0. And it was announced that last year's first round draft pick will be out for the season. They thought he could be the one. In the sporting world, there are players that seem to have it all – at the top of their game. Remember this guy? [Tiger Woods] There was a time when it seemed he had it all. Or there are musicians who had one hit and then nothing – one hit wonders. Remember these guys? They sang a song called the Macarena. Maybe that was Peter a one hit wonder. All this promise, rose to the top only to fall from grace and end up in this place of denial. He could have, should have stood for Jesus – and now he watches as Jesus is nailed to the cross.

In the days that followed, Peter would return to Galilee and the place where it all began – before he ever met Jesus. It was over. Turned out this idea of fishing for men was only an idea. Peter and the others had gone back to fishing for fish. **"I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.** Even fishing wasn't working for them. They thought, at least we can still fish, but now even this is a dead end. Still in the boat with the sun coming up over the horizon, their lives have stopped. What do we do now? From the shore, a voice calls out to them. It is Jesus but they don't know that. They don't recognize him. Jesus calls out to them "Have you caught anything?" He knew. He invites them into a new direction – try the other side. And when they do that, the haul of fish is so great the boat nearly capsizes. John is the first to get what's happening and he says, "It's the Lord!" And the second he says it, Peter jumps into action. He dives into the water and swims toward shore. Jesus is back! Maybe it's not over after all! Can you see it? Peter dives in and he's swimming, his strokes are strong and rapid but as he gets closer to Jesus, his strokes become a dog paddle as the reality of the situation sinks in. Peter had been number one, the one Jesus had entrusted to be the leader and he failed. He crashed in an evening of denial when Jesus needed him the most and now Jesus is back and maybe Peter realized he would have to face Jesus again – face his fear and his failure. When

he got in the water he was excited but the closer he gets – what will I say? How will this go? What will become of me?

Have you ever been to that place – where you let others down? You were seen by others as good and strong and full of potential, but you didn't match the expectations. You weren't the person others thought you were – not even the person you thought you were. You stumbled and fell. It was all a mistake and you feel the shame ("sorry" won't fix it) – you can't get beyond the shame and the embarrassment. You've never really recovered. Maybe you said things you should not have said, or you didn't follow through when others were counting on you, or you acted in ways you wish you had not. And then you come face to face with the reality of what you've done and you're facing the person or the people you've hurt the most. You'd rather stay out in the water than come in to shore. None of us have lived our lives perfectly. None of us have lived up to our God-given potential. All of us are broken. And sometimes it is easier to stay in the water even when we are in over our heads, than it is to swim to shore and meet the one who is standing there. Peter is a failure and he is about to face the one he failed.

But Peter keeps swimming. He's on the shore with Jesus who asks, "Peter do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Three times Jesus asks, Peter do you love me? And three times Peter responds. It is almost as if we should hear the rooster crow once again. Jesus is saying to Peter, you still have what it takes. In spite of the Cross or maybe even because of the Cross, it's not over. Take love and turn it into action. It's time for you to be what I believe you are and when you live into your potential, you have shown your love for me. Jesus gives Peter a chance. Peter had dug a hole of denial, and Jesus offers enough love to fill that hole so Peter can begin again. This one hit wonder has a new recording contract. This franchise player is reactivated. If you are mired in denial and despair, you have a second chance.

Peter's story is our story. All of us broken – and sometimes no one knows that but we do. Even when it seems our failure has brought us to the cross of pain, failure, defeat – Jesus comes back to stand at the shore – and he waits for you. Nothing will ever separate you from God's love. If you have here today and wonder if God could ever forgive you. Or you are divided from others because of things you have done. God is waiting for you to swim to shore. Nothing will separate us from God's love.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of March 5, 2017**

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we want to follow you, but sometimes we are afraid or we allow our own interests to get in the way. Thank you that you never give up on us. Just as your resurrected, living presence transformed Peter, we ask you to continue the work of transforming us from the inside out. Amen.

### **Monday, March 6**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 26:31-35, Luke 22:31-34**

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Tonight you will all fall away because of me. This is because it is written, I will hit the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will go off in all directions. But after I'm raised up, I'll go before you to Galilee." Peter replied, "If everyone else stumbles because of you, I'll never stumble." Jesus said to him, "I assure you that, before the rooster crows tonight, you will deny me three times." Peter said, "Even if I must die alongside you, I won't deny you." All the disciples said the same thing.

"Simon, Simon, look! Satan has asserted the right to sift you all like wheat. However, I have prayed for you that your faith won't fail. When you have returned, strengthen your brothers and sisters." Peter responded, "Lord, I'm ready to go with you, both to prison and to death!" Jesus replied, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster won't crow today before you have denied three times that you know me."

**Observation:** John's gospel said that Jesus' early preaching attracted large crowds. But Jesus didn't trust himself to them because "he didn't need anyone to tell him about human nature, for he knew what human nature was" (John 2:25). As his arrest and crucifixion approached, that extended even to his closest followers. Matthew showed Jesus warning all of his disciples they would "fall away" from him. In Luke, the warning focused specifically on Peter, who made quite a show of bravado.

**Application:** Why did Peter respond with such bravado? What are some examples of ways and situations in which we all might create the impression that we are better than others?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you know my human nature. You know me better than I know myself. Guide me today and every day, shaping and nudging me to become more fully the person you call me to be. Amen.

**Tuesday, March 7**

**Scripture: Matthew 26:55-56, Mark 14:48-52**

Then Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come with swords and clubs to arrest me, like a thief? Day after day, I sat in the temple teaching, but you didn't arrest me. But all this has happened so that what the prophets said in the scriptures might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left Jesus and ran away.

Jesus responded, "Have you come with swords and clubs to arrest me, like an outlaw? Day after day, I was with you, teaching in the temple, but you didn't arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." And all his disciples left him and ran away. One young man, a disciple, was wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They grabbed him, but he left the linen cloth behind and ran away naked.

**Observation:** Because he was so outspoken and boastful, we sometimes only remember that Peter denied knowing Jesus. The other disciples didn't even give themselves a chance to say they didn't know Jesus. They simply ran away! (Many scholars believe the curious detail Mark included about the young man leaving his garment and running away naked was either Mark's own experience or told to him by the eyewitness source who described Jesus' arrest for him.)

**Application:** The other disciples denied Christ as well. What form did their denial take? Do our own denials have to be spoken? Why were the authorities so afraid of Jesus that they sent an armed force to arrest him? How do Christ and Christianity still threaten authority and established human ideas of power and strength?

**Prayer:** Lord of all, you already know all of the secrets I try to hide from others. Help me learn to live in the sunshine of your love, to value honesty and transparency more than secrecy or manipulation. Amen.

## Wednesday, March 8

### **Scripture: Luke 22:54-55, John 18:15-18**

After they arrested Jesus, they led him away and brought him to the high priest's house. Peter followed from a distance. When they lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them.

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Because this other disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard. However, Peter stood outside near the gate. Then the other disciple (the one known to the high priest) came out and spoke to the woman stationed at the gate, and she brought Peter in. The servant woman stationed at the gate asked Peter, "Aren't you one of this man's disciples?" "I'm not," he replied. The servants and the guards had made a fire because it was cold. They were standing around it, warming themselves. Peter joined them there, standing by the fire and warming himself.

**Observation:** The soldiers who arrested Jesus didn't take him to some kind of public courthouse. The gospels say they took him to the expensive, palatial home of Caiaphas, the high priest. Give Peter credit—he at least tried to live up to his boldly-stated loyalty. Instead of melting away into the darkness, he followed “from a distance,” and entered the courtyard of the high priest's imposing home.

**Application:** Do you see any possible symbolism in the fact that these verses mentioned the cold and the fire? When do we tend to feel spiritually cold and what can warm us? Do you tend to feel safer with Jesus or away from him?

**Prayer:** Loving Lord, the world that hated and condemned you is still the world I live in. As I seek to faithfully follow you, teach me how to trust in your eternal protection, and not just my own frail human courage. Amen.

## Thursday, March 9

### **Scripture: Mark 14:66-72**

Meanwhile, Peter was below in the courtyard. A woman, one of the high priest's servants, approached and saw Peter warming himself by the fire. She stared at him and said, "You were also with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it, saying, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't understand what you're saying." And he went outside into the outer courtyard. A rooster crowed. The female servant saw him and began a second time to say to those standing around, "This man is one of them." But he denied it again. A short time later, those standing around again said to Peter, "You must be one of them, because you are also a Galilean." But he cursed and swore, "I don't know this man you're talking about." At that very moment, a rooster crowed a second time. Peter remembered what Jesus told him, "Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down, sobbing.

**Observation:** Strikingly, all four gospels tell the story of Peter denying Jesus. During the recent political campaign, we heard rivals telling negative stories to tear each other down. But Peter was a leader among the early Christians. The gospel writers weren't trying to tear him down. Why did all four Gospel writers feel comfortable telling the story? Maybe it was because Peter had told it again and again across the Roman Empire.

**Application:** Why did all four Gospel writers feel compelled to tell the story of Peter's denial? Why was the story told, “for all of us”? How can failure strengthen us?

**Prayer:** Loving Jesus, I want to serve and follow you faithfully. And too often I fail. Preserve me from indifference, but also from destructive guilt that cuts me off from your grace. Amen.

### **Friday, March 10**

**Scripture: Mark 16:1-8, John 21:15-19**

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asked a second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep." He asked a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" He replied, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. I assure you that when you were younger you tied your own belt and walked around wherever you wanted. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will tie your belt and lead you where you don't want to go." He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me."

**Observation:** It seems likely that as Jesus' enemies condemned and crucified him, Peter thought his denial, his failure, would haunt him the rest of his life. Thankfully, unlike Judas (cf. Matthew 27:3-5), he did not succumb to despair in some irreversible way. Perhaps he remembered all the times he had seen Jesus give people second chances. And Jesus had a wonderful second chance to offer to Peter.

**Application:** Based on the first reading, what tells us that Peter was completely forgiven for his denials of Christ? What does that tell us about our own mistakes?

**Prayer:** Loving Lord, sometimes your love is a "tough love" (in the best, most healing sense of that term). Thank you for always being prepared to offer me, like Peter, a second chance when I need it. Amen.

### **Saturday, March 11**

**Scripture: Acts 2:14, 22-36**

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words!

"Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among

you. You yourselves know this. In accordance with God's established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. God raised him up! God freed him from death's dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him. David says about him, I foresaw that the Lord was always with me; because he is at my right hand I won't be shaken. Therefore, my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced. Moreover, my body will live in hope, because you won't abandon me to the grave, nor permit your holy one to experience decay. You have shown me the paths of life; your presence will fill me with happiness. "Brothers and sisters, I can speak confidently about the patriarch David. He died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this very day. Because he was a prophet, he knew that God promised him with a solemn pledge to seat one of his descendants on his throne. Having seen this beforehand, David spoke about the resurrection of Christ, that he wasn't abandoned to the grave, nor did his body experience decay. This Jesus, God raised up. We are all witnesses to that fact. He was exalted to God's right side and received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit. He poured out this Spirit, and you are seeing and hearing the results of his having done so. David didn't ascend into heaven. Yet he says, The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right side, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.' "Therefore, let all Israel know beyond question that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

**Observation:** It was just over a month since Jesus' Passover crucifixion. Crowds came to Jerusalem again for the feast of Pentecost. And the same Peter who cursed and swore in the high priest's courtyard that he didn't know Jesus now boldly said "People of Israel, listen to this..."! What had happened to change Peter, in such a short time? The risen Jesus had forgiven Peter, and called him to "feed my sheep." So Peter triumphantly declared, "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact" (verse 32).

**Application:** With these statements made by Peter, in the same city and less than two months after he denied even knowing Jesus, would you say that he had been transformed? Have you experienced anything like a transformation in your own life?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, your resurrected, living presence transformed Peter. You are still alive, and I ask you to continue the work of transforming me from the inside out. Amen.