**EASTER SUNDAY**

**THE UNCHANGING HEART OF THE RISEN CHRIST**

**John 21:1-25**

**INTRODUCTION**

One of the unchanging realities about life is that people change. They can change for the better, or they can change for the worse. They can change gradually over time, or they can change in an instant. They can change intentionally, or they can change subconsciously. They can change in response to their circumstances, or their circumstances can change in response to the change that has happened within them.

Change is inevitable. Every day that passes brings change, because you’re one day older, one day wiser or one day more foolish. You’re one day closer to your death. Change brings uncertainty, because we don’t know what to expect.

But God is different. The Bible teaches that God doesn’t change. This is called the Doctrine of God’s Immutability. God’s love isn’t fickle, he doesn’t break his promises, he isn’t angry in the Old Covenant and loving in the New. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, always loving, always just, always righteous, always faithful, always wise. He is who he is, and he will always be who he is, and that will never change.

What about Jesus? Does Jesus change? That’s an especially relevant question for Easter, because in a sense, the resurrection did change him. He went from dying to rising from the dead, from the cross to the empty tomb, from having a body like ours that was subject to death and decay, to a glorified, risen body that will never die again.

The body of Jesus changed, but what about his heart? Did the resurrection change the heart of Jesus? Did the one who was humble, compassionate, gentle and lowly before his resurrection become something different after his resurrection?

We may be tempted to draw that conclusion, especially when we look at the depictions of Jesus in the book of Revelation. In Chapter 1, Jesus appears to the Apostle John with hair as white as wool, his eyes are like fire, his feet are like burnished bronze, and his voice is like the roar of many waters. His appearance is so glorious that John falls at his feet as though dead. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, who walked and talked with Jesus, is no longer able to stand in his presence.

The risen Christ has clearly changed in appearance, because the physical manifestation of his glory is no longer concealed but revealed. But though his appearance has changed, his heart remains the same. Indeed, in Revelation 1 the risen Christ lays his right hand on the prostrate apostle and comforts him, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore.”

That’s what I want to show you in our text today. I want to show you that even after Jesus had conquered death, defeated Satan, paid for our sins, and risen from the dead, his heart remained the same, and that is why we can be confident that his heart will always be the same: a humble heart of service, of love, and of patient leadership towards sinners like us.

I want to show you three things about the heart of the risen Christ:

1. The Risen Christ Serves (v. 1-14)
2. The Risen Christ Loves (v. 15-17)
3. The Risen Christ Calls (v. 18-25)

(1) **THE RISEN CHRIST SERVES** (v. 1-14)

This is the longest appearance of the risen Christ in any of the Gospel narratives, and the third one in John’s Gospel, but what stands out about it isn’t its length, but its stunning simplicity.

**1**After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way.

John tells us in verse 1 that this chapter is about Jesus revealing himself to his disciples. Jesus didn’t stay with his disciples all the time after his resurrection but came and went at different times and different places. Verse 14 says that this particular appearance was the third time that Jesus revealed himself to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

**2**Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together.

The scene begins with seven disciples gathered by the Sea of Tiberias, which was another name for the Sea of Galilee. The seven disciples were Simon Peter, Thomas (doubting Thomas), Nathanael (the same man who doubted whether anything good could come from Nazareth in Chapter 1), the sons of Zebedee (James and John), and two other disciples. They just seem to be hanging out without having much to do, since this was before Pentecost. Jesus had told them to wait until the Spirit had been poured out on them, so that’s what they’re doing.

**3**Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Verse 3 tells us that Simon Peter, ever the spontaneous leader of the group, suddenly decides, “I am going fishing”. The other six evidently agree, and together, they go out in the boat and fish all night when the fish are more likely to be close to the surface, but they catch nothing. Not even a single fish.

**4**Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

Verse 4 says, “Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.” That was because verse 8 says that the boat was “about a hundred yards off”. They couldn’t quite make out who it was.

**5**Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” 

But then this stranger on the shore starts calling out to them, asking, “Children, do you have any fish?” The Greek actually expects a negative answer, so it’s more like, “Boys, you haven’t caught any fish have you?”

The rugged fishermen provide a terse reply. “No”, they answer, perhaps to discourage this stranger from rubbing it in. But the stranger wants to help them, not discourage them.

**6**He said to them, “Cast the net on 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 of the quantity of fish.

In verse 6, he says, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” One might expect these rugged fishermen to shove this advice back into this stranger’s face, but something about him caught their attention. After all, this had happened before. In Luke 5 Simon Peter and his crew had fished all night without catching anything, but Jesus came and told them to go out and let down their nets again, and they caught so many fish that their nets were breaking and their two fishing boats began to sink.

And so, they listen to this stranger’s advice, and “now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish.”

**7**That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.

That’s all the confirmation they needed, at least for one of them. Verse 7 says “That disciple whom Jesus loved” (which was how the Gospel writer John referred to himself) said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” John knew that it was Jesus. Who else could possess such divine knowledge that he would know exactly when and where this huge school of fish would be? If no sparrow falls to the ground except by the will of God, then no fish can swim to the right side of this boat at this moment apart from the will of Christ.

Peter responds yet again with his characteristic, spontaneous enthusiasm. Verse 7 says “When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.” He didn’t think about the best way to get back to the shore. He didn’t think about the overwhelming haul of fish they had just caught. The only thought running through his mind was, “I need to see Jesus. I have to get to him. I have to look at his face and hear his voice *right now*.”

**8**The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

John and the others were no doubt equally enthusiastic but not quite as impulsive. Verse 8 says that, “The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.”

This is a simple illustration of how different people will show their love for Jesus in different ways. Some are going to be like Peter – expressive, spontaneous, and a little messy – while others are going to be a little more practical, like John and the other six disciples. They took care of the fish, but it wasn’t because they cared more about the fish than Jesus. It was because they knew that Jesus wanted them to catch them.

**9**When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.

Verse 9 describes the remarkable scene that awaited them when they returned to the shore. “They saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.” Jesus was cooking for them. The risen Christ humbled himself yet again to serve his servants. The greatest among them became the least. The first became the last. The master became the servant. The one who stooped down to wash their feet before the resurrection now cooked breakfast for them after the resurrection.

**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, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. 

But it didn’t stop there. Jesus invites them to bring some of the fish that they had just caught so that he can cook even more. So Peter responds first once again by going aboard the ship and hauling the entire net full of large fish, 153 of them, and found that the net was not torn, which was another sign that this was no ordinary event, but one orchestrated by the Son of God.

**12**Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.

Jesus then invites them in verse 12, “Come and have breakfast.” He invites them to have table fellowship with him, to enjoy a simple meal of fish and bread around a charcoal fire by the beach, but they’re not sure how to respond. Verse 12 says, “Now none of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’” They knew it was him, but they still wanted to ask because there was something strikingly different about him, but they couldn’t bring themselves to do it.

They had just seen him hanging on a Roman cross. They saw the sky turn black, felt the earth tremble, heard him breathe his last when he cried out, “It is finished!” They saw the spear pierce his side, his limp body taken down from the cross and buried in Joseph’s tomb. They saw him die. And yet, here he was before them, living, breathing, talking, cooking, their crucified Saviour brought back to life, and they were speechless.

**13**Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. **14**This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

The crucified Christ had risen again, but his heart was the same. They may have been slow to approach him, but he was not slow to approach them. Verse 13 says, “Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.”

This is the heart of the risen Christ. He remains a servant, strong and kind, gentle and lowly, mighty and meek, and he always will be, because he didn’t become humble when he took on human flesh. Humility is what compelled him to take on human flesh in the first place. Jesus was, Jesus is, and Jesus always will be our humble, servant King.

(2) **THE RISEN CHRIST LOVES** (v. 15-17)

**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.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” **16**He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” **17**He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved 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.

Verse 15 says, “When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’” Peter replies, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.” In verse 16, Jesus asks a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter replies, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus says, “Tend my sheep.” Verse 17 says Jesus asks a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” This time, Peter was grieved because Jesus asked him a third time and replies, “Lord, you know everything”. You know where the fish are in the sea, and you know the hidden thoughts of my heart. “You know that I love you.” Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.”

Three questions, three responses, three commands, no doubt meant to replicate the three denials that Peter made of Christ as he headed to the cross. The three times that Peter said, “I don’t know the man” would now be replaced with “Lord, you know that I love you.” This wasn’t just repetition. It was redemption. It was Jesus’ way of telling Peter that he was giving him a second chance, and what he wanted Peter to do with this second chance was to feed, tend, and take care of his sheep.

Jesus may be asking Peter if he loves him, but the more important lesson is that Jesus still loves Peter. It was the love of Jesus that was willing to give the love of Peter a second chance. Leon Morris writes,

“His actions showed that Peter had not wanted a crucified Lord. But Jesus was crucified. How did Peter’s devotion stand in the light of this? Was he ready to love Christ as He was, and not as Peter wished Him to be?” – Leon Morris

Jesus didn’t write him off for denying him. He didn’t cancel him, blacklist him, or plunge him down the organizational chart. Instead, he recommissions him to the most sacred task of all: caring for the flock of the Good Shepherd.

That’s the other lesson that we learn from these verses. The heart of Christ is a heart of love, not just for men like Peter, but for his flock. We know about the Great Commission to go and make disciples, but this commission to feed the flock is just as great, because *you* were on the heart of Christ.

Jesus didn’t move on to bigger and better things after he rose from the dead. The burden of the risen Christ remained and remains for all whom the Father has given him, because he is the Good Shepherd. He cares for the flock. He loves the flock. He loves us so much that he was willing to die for the flock. He took our sins upon himself on the cross so that all who trust in him could belong to him forever. As we reflected on Good Friday, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6).

If Jesus died for his sheep, how much more is he ready to stand and provide for his sheep? This was his burning desire after he rose from the dead, that faithful shepherds would care for his flock, feed them with his Word, and lead them into his everlasting arms.

We must never forget that the mission of the church isn’t just evangelistic. It’s pastoral. We are to go and make disciples, but we are also to make sure that those disciples are cared for, tended to, and fed with the nourishment of God’s Word. We are to have an equal commitment to those who do not yet belong to the flock, and those who are already part of the flock, because that’s what Jesus wanted.

If you love Jesus, you will love his sheep, because it is by loving the sheep that you love the great shepherd.

(3) **THE RISEN CHRIST CALLS** (v. 18-25)

**18**Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” **19**(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Jesus concludes his conversation with Peter in verses 18 with a prophesy. It’s a prophecy of his death, to show him that this sacred task of feeding the sheep won’t be easy. It won’t have a happy ending, at least not in this lifetime. Jesus tells him that when he’s old, he’ll lose all the liberty he had as a young man. He will stretch out his hands like a child, and another will dress him and carry him where he does not want to go. But still, Peter must follow him.

Church history tells us that Peter was executed for his faith, likely during the reign of the Emperor Nero who used Christians as human torches in the city of Rome. Some later records even say that Peter was crucified upside-down, because he didn’t consider himself worthy to be killed in the same way as his Lord. But before any of that happened, Peter would live a lifetime of fruitful ministry. Thirty years would pass from the giving of this prophecy to its fulfillment, so that Peter could live out his love for Jesus by feeding the lambs and tending the sheep of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**20**Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” **21**When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” **22**Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” **23**So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

But Peter has questions, not regarding himself, but regarding John. Verses 20-21 say, “Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them” (that is, the Gospel-writer John) and he asks, “Lord, what about this man?” Peter’s asking, “Is he going to suffer the same fate? If I have to die like this, won’t he as well?” But Jesus responds in effect by saying, “It’s none of your business!” Verse 22: “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”

This led to the silly myth in the early church that John wouldn’t die until Christ returned, a myth that John goes out of his way to clear up in verse 23, but the point of this exchange is that all of us are called to follow Jesus, but not all of us are called to follow Jesus in exactly the same way. We’re called to obey the same commands and to believe the same doctrines, but we’re not all called to live the same lives.

We all have our own stories to live out in obedience to Christ, and it would be wrong for us to grumble about our lot in life by looking at others and saying, “Well, what about them? Why do I have to suffer and they don’t?” or “Why does their life look so much better than mine?” or “Why can’t I have the gifts that they do?” Those questions find no place in the Christian life, because they come from a heart of envy and jealousy rather than gratitude and worship.

We are to follow Christ according to the distinct story that he has written for each one of us. Yes, we are to look at the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ, but not as an occasion to grumble and complain about our own lives, but in order to be encouraged by their faith and to be spurred on in our own walk with Christ.

There are things we will never know, because we’re not God. He is. It’s his business to know all things, from where the fish are, to how his disciples will die, and it is our business to follow and to trust Jesus.

John ends this chapter and his Gospel in verse 25:

**25**Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

The Bible tells us everything we need to know about salvation and godly living, but it doesn’t tell us everything we could possibly know about Jesus, because the infinite one cannot be captured by the finite. The Scriptures give us glimpses of the heart of Christ, but its fullness can only be reflected in an endless catalogue of his works that we could never exhaust.

That’s because Jesus wasn’t just at work in the three years of his earthly ministry. He was at work since the beginning of creation as the one through whom everything exists. He is at work through the church, which is the body of Christ, accomplishing his purposes through the ordinary lives of faithful believers. And he is at work in every single one of our lives, providing everything that we need, and leading us deeper into his love.

**CONCLUSION**

Are you ready to follow Jesus? Wherever you may be in your relationship with Jesus, he’s calling you to follow him. Hear the risen Christ, the servant King, the God of love, invite you to walk with him, to know him, and to see him at work in your life and in the lives of those around you. He is unlike anyone you’ve ever met, full of grace and truth, righteous and merciful, holy and humble.

Following Jesus won’t keep you from suffering, but it will enable you to persevere through the suffering, because you know that not a drop of your pain will ever be wasted. The One who plans every day of your life from birth to death loves you and will use even the worst of your pain for your good.

And one day, all the pain will be swallowed up and redeemed by resurrection as all who have died will rise again. Some will rise to everlasting life, and some will rise to everlasting judgment. The difference between them isn’t that some were good and others were bad, but that some trusted in Christ and that others didn’t.

So come, follow Jesus, trust in his sacrifice on the cross for your sins, and rise again to the eternal life of knowing him. He invites you to eat with him, not just to a breakfast by the beach, but to an endless feast of his everlasting love that he has prepared for you to enjoy.

Jesus is the servant King; he is the Good Shepherd; and he is our faithful Lord. So come, follow him.