

'Abide in my love'

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if you've ever found yourself feeling a little bit let down by an ending. Maybe you spent six years watching every episode and re-watching every episode of a long-running TV show, eagerly anticipating the finale, only for it to not quite live up to expectations.

Or maybe you get to the end of a great book, only to find that the author seems to have carried on longer than he needed to. I remember having that feeling reading through *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time.

I hope this won't be a spoiler for any of you. It was released in 1955. It should be all right.

Throughout *The Return of the King*, the last book of the trilogy, huge battles are fought.

The great enemy is defeated, the ring of power is destroyed, the long-awaited king is coronated.

It is an epic conclusion to an epic trilogy. But then, just before you get to the last chapter, the last few pages, you turn over, and there's a whole chapter there about hobbits squabbling in the shire.

[1 : 23] And the first time I read it, I was like, why is this here? I think Peter Jackson, when he was directing the films, had a similar reaction, and so just didn't put it in there.

It doesn't feel like it fits. Well, on first reading, you might well feel the same way about John's gospel.

Joe preached for us this morning from chapter 20, and I don't know about you, but to me, on first reading, that sounded like a great ending. Jesus has risen from the dead.

And his last words in that chapter there, isn't it? Blessed are those who haven't seen and believe.

And then John brings everything to a fitting close by saying, I have written all these things so that you who haven't seen might believe and be blessed and have life in Jesus' name.

End scene. Roll credits. Perfect ending, right? But then you turn over the page, and there's another chapter.

[2 : 36] But instead of an even more dramatic climax, on first reading, it looks like it's some blokes going fishing, and then having some breakfasts, and then John just kind of clarifying or giving the answer to an ongoing game of Chinese whispers.

And you think, what? Are you sure, John? Should you not have maybe ended 25 verses earlier?

But just like in the *Lord of the Rings*, when you take some time to think about what's going on, when you figure out what the author is up to, you realize these endings are no mistake, and are, in fact, even better.

But to understand why this ending is no mistake, we need to first remind ourselves of what has just happened. Right?

Most obviously, we saw this morning, didn't we? Jesus has risen. Jesus has risen. If you were here this morning, I trust you won't need me to remind you, but we have just heard, haven't we, of the empty tomb.

The risen Lord Jesus appearing to the disciples twice in a locked room in Jerusalem, the second occasion when Thomas is there, to whom he says, touch me. See me, hear me, touch me.

[4 : 02] We have had two eyewitness accounts. And now, here at the end of his book, John throws a third into the mix, doesn't he? So, I think at its most basic level, this final chapter is another testimony of the risen Lord Jesus.

I mean, John introduces the chapter that way, doesn't he, in verse 1. Jesus revealed himself again. We'll dive into the details as we go, but as we do that, let's not lose sight of this overarching fact.

Jesus has risen. John witnessed it with his very own eyes, twice in Jerusalem and again here. This is further evidence, these verses, of the greatest events in history.

If you want to think more about that, let me point you to Joe's sermon this morning. But we might still wonder, is it a bit of an anticlimax? Well, I think we get an idea of what John is doing here by

paying attention to where he finished chapter 20, and knowing, right, given that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit, that this is no mistake.

He knows what he is doing here. In which case, I take it it goes something like this, right? Chapter 20, believe in the resurrected Jesus.

[5 : 32] Chapter 21, this is what believing in the resurrected Jesus looks like. John is not content for his audience to assent to the historicity of the resurrection.

He wants his audience to know that believing in the risen Jesus means your life is now shaped by your relationship with him. That is, I think, what holds this last chapter together.

It is all about the disciples' relationship with the risen Jesus. And that, I think, helps us to see this is not an anticlimax. It is a launchpad into discipleship.

It is the beginning of a life of following Jesus. So trusting that his audience are ready to believe in the resurrected Jesus, which, if you were here this morning, I hope you are too.

John now says in this final chapter, believe in him. Believe in him by depending on him, by loving him, and by following him.

[6 : 44] So let's just take each of those in turn, beginning with, Jesus has risen, so depend on him. In verse 1 there, John takes us straight from the locked room in Jerusalem to the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

It's called the Sea of Tiberias here. It's the same place. And there we find seven of the disciples of Jesus. Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James and John, and two others who aren't named.

And Simon, right, stands up in the group and says, I'm going fishing. And just like on a Sunday afternoon when someone announces they're going for a walk, everyone else kind of looks at each other, chucks their shoulder and thinks, yeah, why not?

So off they all go. Now, some people kind of suggest here that the disciples are faithlessly giving up on Jesus and going back to their old way of life.

But I think that's reading a bit too much into the situation. It's only from the other Gospels that we learn some of these men were fishermen. And if we lean into the other Gospels for understanding of what's going on here, well, I think we've also got to listen to what Jesus says in Mark, doesn't he?

[7 : 55] About saying to the disciples, I will meet you in Galilee. So here the disciples are in Galilee. So I don't think we need to go kind of either way, positively or negatively, about their decision to go fishing.

But we will see in a moment, I think that it is significant that they are fishing. So why don't they go on the boats? But after a whole night, verse three there, after a whole night of fishing, they catch absolutely nothing.

But then day begins to break. John often uses the themes of light and dark, day and night through his Gospel. Verse four, just as day was breaking, saying, Jesus stood on the shore.

But the disciples don't know it's Jesus yet. So you can kind of imagine the conversation that follows, right? Children, do you have any fish? Who's this guy? Tell him we don't have any fish.

Do we admit we've got it all wrong? No, we don't have any fish. Try the right side. There'll be some there. Try the right side. We've been here all night, right? Do you not think we've tried the right side yet?

[9 : 13] Like, you know, he seems pretty confident. We've got nothing to lose. Just chuck the net over the side. So over the side goes the net one more time. And all of a sudden, a desperately unfruitful night gives way to an abundantly fruitful morning.

They had nothing. Now they have more than they can manage to pull into the boats. What has changed? Only one thing has changed.

Jesus. Remember what Jesus said in our first reading that Diane read for us earlier from John 15, speaking to the disciples. Apart from me, you can do nothing.

Jesus isn't saying here you'll never be able to catch a fish unless you trust in him. His words in chapter 15 were in the context of good fruit. He is saying truly fruitful labor.

Kingdom work can never happen apart from him. And that, I think, is what we're kind of seeing presented to us here in chapter 21.

[10 : 34] More than just a real world example of Jesus' earlier teaching. This is, I think, significantly the disciples abundantly fishing in complete dependence on Jesus.

Two ways I think that can be understood, both of which I think actually end up in the same place. First, and probably better known, Jesus had in Matthew and Mark called disciples to be fishers of

men.

And so the disciples going out to fish post-resurrection, I think is a picture of how they will go as apostles. Completely dependent on Jesus.

Or, or perhaps also, maybe John's got them both in mind, he might well be looking back to Ezekiel 47 here. Where Ezekiel sees in his vision a river flowing from the temple, right?

Water flowing from the dwelling place of God on earth that brings life to everything it touches. And in Ezekiel 47, on the shore of this river that brings life in abundance everywhere it goes, are fishermen.

[11 : 48] Casting their nets from one end to the other. Life flowing from God's dwelling place, fishermen gathering in very many fish of every kind.

Either way, I think that the point is bigger than just a few fish in a net. It is pointing to something of the nature of the work the disciples are to carry out post-resurrection, kind of gathering together countless people for Jesus, but primarily it teaches us, doesn't it?

Primarily it teaches us about the disciples' absolute dependency on Jesus to carry out their work. They got nothing without him.

With him, they have more than they can pull in. We can do nothing apart from him. Remember Jesus' words there in John 15?

We can do nothing apart from him but coming to Jesus. Well, it doesn't just look like kind of falling in the plumber when the sink's broken, does it? It's abiding in him. Abiding in his love.

[13 : 04] Coming to Jesus is a relationship with Jesus. It's only at this point that John clocks on who is standing the shore and so he says to Peter, doesn't he, it is the Lord.

And Peter throws on some clothes and jumps in. John recognizes the Lord, Peter jumps in the water. I think to Jesus, kind of just as he ran to the empty tomb, but what I love about it is just as at the tomb, John is still John and Peter is still Peter.

At the tomb, we read this this morning, didn't we? At the tomb, John arrived first and kind of peered in ponderously. Then Peter kind of comes charging by, straight past him and straight into the tomb. The resurrection of Jesus has completely transformed their world and a very real sense it has completely transformed the disciples. But they are still John and Peter.

John is the first to think, Peter is the first to act. They still have different personalities that God will use in different ways. Now let's just kind of tuck that away for the last point this evening.

[14 : 21] Hopefully we'll see why that's significant then. But for now, in whatever order, they all arrive on the shore. They all arrive on the shore and this I think is my favorite kind of detail in the whole chapter.

They get out of the boat in verse 9. They kind of get a whiff of the barbecue and they think, oh great, Jesus has got the fire going, we've got the fish. Oh. What do you see in verse 9?

Who's got the fish? Jesus has got the fish, right? Jesus already has the fish. They've spent all night getting nothing until Jesus appeared and then they get out of the boat and there Jesus is cooking some fish.

Pictures speak a thousand words, don't they? Jesus said it back in chapter 19, but it couldn't be more obvious than it is here. The disciples need Jesus.

Jesus doesn't need the disciples. But he still says to them, verse 10, bring some of your fish too.

[15 : 34] He could do it on his own. He chooses not to. And I think this is where we come back to that whole idea of relationship that permeates this chapter.

Remember how Jesus called to the disciples in verse 5? Children. Children. I am perfectly capable of making coffee, in case you were wondering.

That means when I'm boiling the kettle in the morning, there is no part of me that is thinking, man, I really need some help here. But then, a small toddler appears by my side and I don't tell him, go and do your own thing.

I've got this under control. I do have it under control. But I still want his help. Not because it makes things easier.

It's a lot more stressful. Not because it makes things quicker. It takes at least twice the amount of time. Not because it's more cost effective. Coffee grounds end up everywhere. Cafetiers get broken.

[16 : 44] You show an accountant the cost-benefit analysis of getting a toddler's help in anything really, and they're understandably going to tell you, aren't they, that's a terrible idea.

Don't let them get involved. But while the pragmatic benefit is non-existent, there is, isn't there? There is a massive relational benefit. We both know it is just much better to do it together. Not because it happens quicker, not because it happens more effectively, but because we grow together in our love for one another through it. Jesus doesn't need us, but he does love us, and so he loves to work with us.

We are completely dependent on him, just as children are with their parents. Parents usually don't need their children's help, but they do want to love them, and to be loved by them, and so you do things together.

[18:01] And so Jesus says, bring in your fish too. Jesus makes breakfast with the disciples, and he makes breakfast for the disciples. He sits everyone down and serves them once more.

Perhaps we might think when we hear of the resurrection of Jesus, of his ascension into heaven, of him seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, ruling over everything.

Perhaps we think he's distant from us, or he's just having a hard-earned rest. The resurrected Jesus still serves.

We need him, we are fed by him spiritually and physically, we are completely dependent on him.

And knowing that dependence and seeing Jesus' provision will, I trust, help us to love him.

And that's exactly where we see the conversation go after breakfast has been polished off. Jesus has written, so we depend on him, and secondly, we love him.

[19:12] I could have said earlier that the disciples would have come ashore and got a whiff of the charcoal fire and thought, great, no one likes waiting around for a barbecue to heat up, do they? But one disciple, right, one disciple would have had a very different feeling when they got a smell of the burning charcoal.

Smells. Smells often remind us of things, don't they? You smell cinnamon or nutmeg and you start thinking of Christmas. Maybe someone you know always wears the same perfume and you think of them wherever you see it.

Granny's house always smells like Granny's house and there's no other way to describe it. The smoke from the charcoal fire would have entered Simon Peter's nostrils. And there's no mistaking where his mind goes back to you.

There's only one other occasion in the New Testament where a charcoal fire is specifically mentioned. And it was three chapters earlier in John's Gospel, verse 18 of chapter 18, in the courtyard of the high priest, after Jesus has been arrested, where Peter is in the midst of denying his Lord three times.

Jesus knows what he is doing here, doesn't he? And so after breakfast, he turns to Peter and asks him directly in front of the other disciples, do you love me more than these?

[20:54] It's quite a question, isn't it? Yes, Lord, Peter says, and you think, ah, here goes Peter again, right? I love you the most. Even if everyone says they love you, I love you more, I'll never deny you, I'll die for you, I love you the most.

But actually, I think, well, I mean, just look at what he says next. Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

He doesn't say, does he, yes, Lord, I love you more than these and I'm willing to prove it. He just says, you know that I love you. Each time Jesus asks the question, Peter responds this way, you know that I love you.

It's a confession, isn't it, that says, I know I can't point to my own actions as evidence of my love, but I can point to your knowledge.

To believe in the risen Lord Jesus is to love the risen Lord Jesus. And for Peter, this conversation, well, I think it's better to say changed his life.

[22:13] I think it's a really helpful picture of what repentance really looks like. It's not just feeling guilty and remorseful of our past actions. That is a good start.

But anyone can do that, right? You don't need to be a Christian to feel bad for what you've done.

But to believe in Jesus is to turn from our sin and turn to Jesus and say, I love you, Lord.

God. And be able to say, you know I love you. It's not lip service, is it?

It is a love that Jesus knows himself. Jesus asked these questions to publicly restore him, to say to him and the rest of the disciples, Peter's past failures are not going to define his future discipleship. Peter's past does not define Peter's future. That is gone. Now I want you to look forward. And the direction forward that Jesus points Peter is to shepherd his flock, isn't it?

[23 : 37] Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Peter was called as need to a specific ministry of shepherding God's flock.

But I think the implications for everyone flow out quite naturally from that. A declaration of love for Jesus means a commitment to care for his people.

If you profess you love Jesus but do not love your brothers and sisters in Christ, you might say with your lips I love you Jesus but I would question whether you can say to Jesus, you know that I love you.

Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. And the result, verse 18 and 19, the result is that Peter will now be able to do what he earlier said he would do, die for Jesus.

It's a pretty solemn picture that Jesus paints of Peter's death, arms outstretched just as Jesus were. One thing is clear there, isn't it?

[24 : 54] Verse 19, even in this way and perhaps most clearly in this way, Peter would glorify God. God's love for God.

And that, I think for every one of us, is what our love for Jesus should drive us to. That is perhaps the best way to know in yourself if you have that love.

Does your love for Jesus mean you are ready to live for God's glory, whatever the cost? Peter really could say he would and he did.

May we be able to say that too. So, believing in the risen Lord Jesus means depending on Jesus. It means loving Jesus.

And then thirdly and finally, it means following Jesus. Picking up really from the end of verse 19 there, after saying this, Jesus said to Peter, follow me.

[26 : 04] At first, that probably sounds like a simple instruction and it looks that way to begin with, doesn't it? Because they just head for a walk along the shore. But Peter looks over his shoulder and there is John a few steps behind.

You know that thing when you're growing up? Usually when you're a teenager, you're sitting around the table, dinner's finished and mum or dad turns to you and says, can you help with the dishes?

And they don't say anything to your brother or sister sitting on the other side of the table. What do you say? Maybe you're a more godly child than I was. What about him?

Right, I'm not sprinting to the sink. I'm wondering what his role is in all this is. Peter has just been told, hasn't he, that his hands are going to be stretched out like Jesus so that he might glorify God in his death.

It's not a joyful prophecy, is it? It is one that will glorify God's, but it's pretty solemn. And so Peter sees John behind them and says to Jesus, what about him?

[27 : 18] What about him? What about him? to which Jesus replies, what is that to you? If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?

You follow me. Remember back in the boats where we saw that John was still John and Peter was still Peter.

I think we see the payout here. God uses each of his people as he has made them for his purposes to glorify him.

There's a sense, isn't we, in which we should all be growing in the same areas. We should all be growing in our love, our joy, peace, patience, kindness, and much else besides. That doesn't mean we're to become the same person.

I think there's comfort, but also a challenge in that. Comfort in that coming to Christ, following the risen Jesus, does not mean leaving behind you.

[28 : 31] Living for Jesus means a renewal and a fulfilling of who you are and who you were made to be. But the challenge is that just as we are each different, so God's plans.

for each of our lives will be different. And I think that is a challenge because we always, don't we, we always think the grass is greener on the other side.

If you're in school, maybe you just wish you were a student. If you're a student, maybe you miss being at school when someone was there to do the cooking and cleaning, or maybe you're a student who wishes you were working and had an income.

If you're working with an income, you probably wish you were still a student. If you're a mum, you probably look longingly at people whose workday ends at five o'clock.

But if you've not got a family, you might look longingly at a mum with her children. If you're young, you might wish you were tired. If you're retired, you probably wish you were young.

[29 : 51] Maybe you struggle, like me, with your health, physically or mentally. You have to take time off work or uni, and you look at other people and you think, why?

Why can't I be on their path? If you're healthy, you might look at someone on a couple of months sick leave and think, oh, that sounds all right, doesn't it? The reality is, isn't it, we very rarely know what other people are going through.

Beneath the smiles on a Sunday might be a whole world of struggles. But whoever we are, whatever stage we're at, whatever we are struggling with at the moment, we almost always look at someone, don't we, and think, they seem to have it better.

wouldn't that be better? The grass is always greener. But here's Jesus' points. He doesn't say whether the grass is actually greener on the other side.

It might be, it might not be. Jesus says, what is it to you? The point is, we are to go wherever Jesus leads us.

[31 : 09] Wherever we are, whatever stage of life we're in, whatever stage of life we'd like to be in, Jesus says, you are where I want you to be.

Follow me. You, follow me. follow me. We are to go wherever Jesus leads us.

However much better his plan for someone else might sound to us. Jesus says, you are where I've placed you, so it doesn't matter. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, you make sure you are following me.

And so, believing in Jesus does not mean living the life you see another Christian live, nor does it mean longing for the life other people live.

It means following Jesus. Whatever burdens he has given you, whatever else you long for, whatever he has in store for you. For Peter, that meant death on a cross.

[32 : 17] For John, it meant living a long, long life. Each of them couldn't have looked at the other one. Peter thinking, man, I'd rather not get crucified and live like John.

John could have looked at Peter and thought, man, he got to go and be with Jesus 35 years before I did. Jesus' point is, I've got plans for John.

I've got plans for you. And because you are Peter and he is John, your plans will look very different. But both of you, wherever I take you, follow me.

Focus on Jesus. And where he is taking you, not where he has taken others, you, Jesus said to Peter, you, follow me.

And so that is, altogether, that is something, isn't it, of what believing in the risen Jesus looks like. Well, like we said at the start, it is, I think it is just a launchpad into life of discipleship, but it is a great place to begin.

[33 : 25] Because Jesus has risen, depend on him, love him, follow him with all of your hearts for all of your days.

But that's not where John ends, is it? That's not where John ends, because fittingly, John ends with Jesus. And this is a great ending, verse 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.

Right, John ends his gospel basically by saying, believe in Jesus because of everything I've said, and believe in Jesus because of everything I haven't said. The whole world, right, the whole world would make too small a library to contain the greatness, the wonder, the beauty of the eternal word who became flesh.

Jesus is so much more wonderful than we know now and than we will ever know in this life.

[34 : 53] He did far more than we could ever imagine. He is more powerful than we could ever imagine. He is more loving than we could ever imagine.

He loves you and me more than we will ever know. I trust we will each depend on Jesus, love him, and follow him, but know that we have not even begun to fathom just how great he is.

So will you not depend on him, love him, and follow him? Will you here this evening believe in the risen Lord Jesus?

so that you too would have life in his name. Let us pray as we close. Father, we thank you that you sent your son Jesus, so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life.

And we thank you that in your goodness you have shown us what it means to believe in Jesus. So help each and every one of us here now to depend on the risen Lord Jesus, to love him and to follow him all of our days with all of our hearts so that we, like Peter, would live and die for your

glory.

[36 : 14] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.