

Windblown

What does the resurrection story mean?

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 2, 2006](#) issue

In their book [*The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem*](#), Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan differentiate between historical truth and parabolic truth in the resurrection accounts. They argue that “What does it mean?” is a more important question than “Did it really happen?” and that parable and parabolic language can make truth claims.

Without engaging that debate, I can say with confidence that the people who crowd into churches on Easter didn't come to hear the preacher's opinion on the historicity of the accounts. They do come to hear about what it means. “If you believe the tomb was empty, fine; now, what does this story mean?”

In addressing that question, I have always loved the story of Jesus and Peter on the beach in the early morning as recounted in John 21. The meal of charcoaled fish and bread has always sounded delicious to me. And the conversation between Jesus and Peter has the ring of truth to it. The last time they were together had to have been the worst day in Peter's life, the occasion of his denial that he even knew Jesus. Earlier that same evening Peter had claimed bravely that he would die with Jesus. His denial is one of the most honestly human incidents in all of literature.

I can almost write myself into the small group standing around the fire on the beach, with no one saying anything until Jesus breaks the silence: “Peter, do you love me?” Three times Jesus asks, and three times Peter says yes. Three times Jesus tells Peter to express that love by caring for and feeding the sheep.

There's so much going on in that story that is familiar: Peter's embarrassment and disappointment in himself, for instance. There is no pain quite like publicly failing to live up to others' expectations and your own.

What Jesus does not say to Peter is as important as what he does say. It would have been natural for him to refer to Peter's spectacular failure, to ask for an apology, or

at least to refer to the denial. I don't think I could have resisted doing that. What happens instead is grace, the pure, unconditional acceptance and love of God in Jesus Christ, and Peter's rebirth, restoration, redemption—salvation in charcoaled fish and a piece of toast.

There are no conditions, but there is a commission. There are the sheep to feed and care for. There is work to do now, not to earn the forgiveness and acceptance that has been given, but as a way of expressing gratitude for the gift of grace, and as a way of living the new, resurrected life that we have received.