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Following from a distance – Luke 22:54-62

In any race it is important not to fall behind or defeat is inevitable. On one fateful evening Peter fell off the pace. He followed Jesus when others fled, but Luke records “he followed at a distance.”

Late on Thursday night Jesus was arrested. The disciples had scattered, into the darkness. However Peter *had promised never to desert Jesus, and he wasn't going to start now*. In the confusion it was easy to tag along though by the time he got to the high priest's house, the soldiers had taken Jesus inside. The excitement over, some had gone home and a few were warming themselves by a fire. Soldiers were milling about, servant girls were running errands. There were hangers-on and passers-by, waiting to see what would happen to Jesus.

Becoming colder Peter was drawn to the fire. While it gave warmth it also made his face visible. Then, unexpectedly, a servant girl spoke up “This man was with him.” The words were like an electric shock. Peter thought fast, instinctively played dumb and pleaded ignorance: “Woman I don't know him.” It seemed to work. But had it? Were they whispering about him? What should he do? Minutes passed. Then a second voice spoke up: “You also are one of them.” Heart pounding, Peter tried to act calm Quick, think, say something. So he said, “Man, I am not!” Was his face flushed, his tone unconvincing? He was totally out of his comfort zone.

Eventually Jesus' interrogation with the high priest finished. Just then a man confidently spoke up. “Certainly this man was with him, for he is a Galilean” Peter's accent had betrayed him. Backed into a corner, he found himself saying. “Man I do not know what you are talking about.” The denial comes tumbling out and then a cock began to crow. What possessed Peter to deny Jesus?

He was tired, alone and on unfamiliar ground. He had been caught totally off-guard and spoken without thinking. No turning back, he had to stick to his lie and repeat it.

Part of the irony is that Peter denied Christ not to the High Priest, or a soldier, but to a servant girl. *When he played out this scenario in his mind of standing up for Jesus he had never expected to be questioned by someone like that!* Peter was ready to die for Christ that night. Had he not drawn a sword to defend Jesus, just hours earlier? Maybe, if Peter had been brought before the high priest he would have said, “Yes, I am a follower of Jesus” and would have followed his Master to the cross. That’s the kind of man he was. *He was totally unprepared to be questioned by a slip of a lass and one lie led on to another.*

He had made bad decisions all evening. He boasted to Jesus instead of listening; he didn’t appreciate his own weakness; he ignored Jesus’ warning; He should have kept clear of the fire but perhaps his faith as well as his body was frozen till things got too hot for him! So it was that Peter—the “Rock”— crumbled.

Three things happened one after the other:

1. The cock crowed and Peter remembered Jesus’ words, spoken in love as well as sorrow, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.”
2. “The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.”

That must have happened as the guards took Jesus from his interview with Caiaphas to his trial before the Sanhedrin. As Peter denied Jesus for the third time he looked up and saw him looking directly at him. By this time Jesus’ face is black and blue, his eyes almost swollen shut, his cheeks bruised and covered with spittle. A trace of blood trickles from his lips. Even though it is in the dead of night, Peter can see him perfectly in the firelight. And Jesus doesn’t say a word but his look said everything. “Look at me, Peter. Look at me. Do you really not know me?”

3. Peter’s tears.

Peter wept bitterly. His heart broke. He stumbled off into the darkness his shoulders heaving, his body shaking. What had he done? How had he fallen so far? *Before we are too hard on Peter remember that he was fundamentally loyal to Jesus.* It was the failure of the brave. After all, he alone followed Jesus into the courtyard. *Peter didn’t handle himself well, but at least he was there.* In the end, it was not Peter’s faith that failed, but his courage.

Jesus never gave up on Peter. As a bone that is broken often becomes stronger after it is healed, the same thing can be true of our failures. God can take us where we are broken and make us stronger than we were before.

This is what happened to Peter. His guilt was turned into grace; his shame into sympathy and his failure into faithfulness. *Peter would do much more for Jesus Christ after his fall than he did before.*

Before, he was loud, boisterous and unreliable; afterwards, he became a mighty preacher and pastor. Before he was a big talker; afterwards he spoke only of what Jesus Christ could do for others. He was the same but different. In his failure Peter lost his vanity, pride, self-confidence, rash impulsiveness and unreliability. After his restoration Peter gained humility, new confidence in God, tested courage, a new determination to serve Jesus Christ and a willingness to use his experience to help others.

The things he lost he didn't really need; the things he gained couldn't have come any other way.

There is much in this story that should encourage us. It was not the real Peter who denied the Lord; it was the real Peter who followed him into the courtyard. It was not the real Peter who cursed and swore; it was the real Peter who said, "You are the Christ." The Lord sees beyond our faults to the loyalty underneath. He sees our earnest desire to please and follow him. So, if you are being tempted, to follow Jesus at a distance, call on him to wait for you to catch up. And if you have fallen on your face then Peter not only felt like you, he also fell like you, and he would stand again. If Peter can come back, anybody can come back.

Suppose however this is not just a word to us personally but a word to our Church now. A call to recognise when our courage as a Church has faltered and our witness has been compromised because we have felt outnumbered and we have capitulated. Do we need to shed tears so that we can find healing? Do we need to seek the empowering of the Holy Spirit to testify to the grace and mercy of God?

This story could only have come from Peter. No one else was there to tell what happened. We wouldn't have done that. We hide our mistakes hoping no one finds out about them. Not Peter. Once he was restored, he couldn't stop talking about what Jesus had done for him.

There is hope for all of us—the best of us, the worst of us, and the rest of us. If you are broken, He can make you whole again. If you have failed, He can make you useful again. If you have lost your courage, He can give it back to you again. Take heart and believe the good news. If He did it for Peter, He can do it for you and he can do it for our Church. Jesus said "Follow me" but don't do it at a distance.