



## The Liberation of Know-it-All

1 Peter 3:13-17

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The life of discipleship begins with the willingness to claim faith in the Creator God, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, or Lord. In fact, if you read through the Biblical text of the New Testament, Jesus himself indicates that faith is all that is necessary to be a disciple. The scriptures suggest that other aspects of one's life will change once we have faith ... but it is faith that is first and primary to discipleship.

Faith is defined in Hebrews 11 as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Therefore, we can say that faith is, by Biblical definition, a trusting in things we do not know for sure. It is belief in a God-divined will that we are wholly incapable of knowing, and yet, still choose to follow.

Paul's writings echo this kind of believing in the unknown time and again. For example, in 1 Corinthians 2, Paul writes, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”

I don't know at what point this shift took place, but across the world of modern Christianity, there is an expressed demand that faith must be shored up with certainty and finitude on all aspects of God, Christ, and the minutia of discipleship. There are many who claim that one must have no doubts and no questions regarding the teachings of the Biblical text, or that one can't be uncertain regarding the absolute understanding of scripture. These demands are piggy-backed with a reading of the Bible defined as “inerrant,” which, for most of the people using the word, means that *they* are incapable of being wrong about what the Bible says.

In her book, *Wholehearted Faith*, Rachel Held Evans offers, “There is liberation in not having to know everything and not having to impress everyone with that [kind of] boundless knowledge.”<sup>i</sup> She continues by offering, “the life of faith is also a life of holy curiosity.”

I want to consider today the freeing invitation of Peter to the early church in claiming faith without having to claim a personal inerrancy regarding the Biblical text. How can one, devout in their faith, live a life of honest and devoted discipleship without having to know *everything* about faithful living? Perhaps more importantly, is it *more* faithful to live a life of holy curiosity than a life of rigid absolutism regarding the Biblical text? This freeing invitation is, as Held Evans titles it, “The Liberation of Know-it-All.”

We actually looked at the letter of 1 Peter earlier this year, so perhaps you remember some of its context. Peter is writing this letter to a handful of Christian communities from the diaspora of the

Mediterranean region. These are gentile believers from beyond Israel: new converts to the faith who were not steeped in the historic Hebrew tradition. Though many scholars do not believe it was actually Peter who wrote the letter, it is attributed to the apostle Simon Peter. It is written from his perspective. So, let's assume for now that Peter did write this text. What does the author bring to this text?

Think about Simon Peter for just a minute. What do you remember about Peter from the Gospel texts?

Before Peter became a disciple, he was a fisherman. In Luke, chapter 5, we first meet Peter when Jesus got on Peter's boat and told him to push off from the shore. After a brief teaching moment to everyone on the boat, Jesus told Peter to push out into deeper waters and to cast his nets into the sea – to go fishing. Peter responded hesitantly, saying, "Master, we have worked all night and have caught nothing. However, if you say so, I will put down the nets." ... He didn't really believe that he would catch anything, but was willing to give it a try. Once the nets went down, they caught so many fish, their nets started to break and the boat began to sink.

In Matthew 14, we encounter Peter and Jesus again on the Sea of Galilee. This time, Jesus is walking on the water out toward the boat in the middle of a storm. The disciples are unsure if it really is Jesus, so Peter says, "If it is you, Lord, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus responded, "Come on." And indeed, Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. "But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and he began to sink." He cried out to Jesus to save him, which Jesus did. Following this, Jesus chastised him, saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

On the night of Jesus' arrest and trial, you may recall that Peter has his own aside in the Biblical text. Peter was sitting outside the house of the High Priest where Jesus was being questioned. A woman said to Peter, "You were with Jesus the Galilean," but Peter denied it. Again, another woman said of Peter, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth," and again, Peter denied it. A third time, bystanders came up to him, saying, "Certainly you are one of them, for your accent betrays you." Peter began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know the man!"

The Gospel of John recalls that Peter was one of the disciples to go to the tomb on the morning of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene, who had already been to the tomb, had gone to tell the disciples that Jesus' body was missing. Peter and John ran to the tomb. John outran Peter, which may be a commentary on just how "slow" Peter was ... but ultimately, having looked into the tomb and having confirmed Mary's proclamation that the tomb was empty, the Gospel says of Peter and John, "they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. And the disciples returned to their homes."

Four times, Peter is highlighted in the gospel narrative as having failed to *understand*. Four times, he's chastised for either lacking faith, or for having little faith. And yet, in Matthew 16, when Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am," it is Peter who responds, saying, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus tells him, that it is him – Peter – that will be the rock upon whom the church will be built.

Despite his misgivings and his failures to understand, it is Peter who is hand-picked by Christ as the foundational leader of the new Christian community.

As Peter is writing this letter to the early church, he knew what it was like to misunderstand. Peter knew what it was like to have doubts from time to time. Peter knew that the quest of wholehearted faith would be filled with challenges.

As so, as he writes, he writes with all of his own personal truths in mind. Can you hear him writing from experience? In verse 14, Peter writes, "Even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord." He goes on, writing further, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

The one who denied Christ three times is now saying, "be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands an account from you."

What's different? What has changed for Peter? How has he gone from being the one who couldn't get it right, to now being so ardent in his instructions to others to have faith.

This is just my reading of the text, but I think a major shift comes in Peter's final interaction with the resurrected Christ.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 21, Jesus goes back to Galilee to visit with the disciples. From the shoreline, Jesus sees the disciples fishing and he calls out to them, telling them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. The disciples are unsure of who he is – they don't recognize him as Jesus. They're hesitant to follow the instructions, but do so anyway. The nets quickly fill up with fish – so many fish that they couldn't haul the net back into the boat.

This event triggers a memory, and John realizes that it is Jesus on the shore. He turns to Peter and says, "It is the Lord!"

John 21:7 says, "When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake." I have never understood why he was fishing in the buff, and it was kind of him to put some clothes on before encountering his resurrected rabbi ... but notice Peter didn't wait for the fish to be hauled in, nor did he wait for the boat to dock. Like Forrest Gump seeing Lieutenant Dan on the docks, he jumped off the boat into the water and swam to Jesus.

The other disciples took care of the fish, and brought some ashore to eat. Beginning in verse 15, we read, "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, do you love me more than these?' Simon said, 'yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' ... And then Jesus asked him again, 'Simon, do you love me?' And Simon said, 'Yes Lord; you know that I love you.' And Jesus said, 'Tend my sheep.' ... and then Jesus asked him *a third time*, 'Simon, do you love me?' And Peter felt hurt because Jesus had asked him a third time. And Peter said, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' And Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep.' And then, Jesus concluded, 'Follow me.'

See, Peter had failed a number of times. But ultimately, he kept showing up. And, deep in his heart, he loved the Lord. And it seems, at least in the way the stories fit together, that for Jesus, this is enough. It is enough to keep showing up – to keep trying – to keep embracing the love of the Lord, and to accept the invitation to “Follow me.”

Back in his letter, in 1 Peter, chapter 4, Peter summarizes the call to discipleship. He writes, beginning in verse 7, “be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.”

In her writing, Rachel Held Evans states, “Certainty isn’t faith.” The call to discipleship is not about having all the right answers, or following all the right rules. The life of faithfulness isn’t about forcing others to think like you think, and to restrict how others live. No ... the call to faithfulness is the willingness to trust in what you do not know, and to trust in the hope of what you have not yet seen. The invitation to discipleship is to follow Christ, not knowing where he is going or where you may be called to go. The life of the Christian community is not about restrictive and forcible adherence, but the life-giving invitation to join. It’s about offering love – a love of God and of one another. It’s about offering hospitality, that others might find a place of acceptance and belonging. It’s about showing up and sharing in the unforeseen work that marks what God is doing today ... here ... now ... in this moment, in this world, in this age, in this community.

We should not be surprised that this is Peter’s teaching. It was his experience. He failed, but he showed back up. He lacked faith, but he tried again. He was unsure, and he sank in the waters, but he got back on the boat. And his willingness to trust in Jesus – to show up for Jesus even after he had failed – to leap into the waters to be at Jesus’ side ... this is the life of faith. Free yourselves from the guilt and stress of not knowing-it-all, and just sit at Jesus’ side. Be willing to show up when Christ calls. Or, in the words of Christ himself, “Follow me.”

Friends, this is the life of faith – that we show up, that we offer love and grace, and that we seek to live and to love as Christ has given us an example. May you embrace such a faith, that together, we might live as disciples of the risen Lord. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Held Evans. *Wholehearted Faith*. HarperOne, 2021.