

**1 Timothy 6:11-16      Mark 14:26-31, 66-72      February 28, 2016**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?  
DENIAL IS NOT JUST A RIVER IN EGYPT**



***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Twenty-five feet in the air, on top of a marble obelisk, sits the “Big Chicken,” which is actually a 30-inch bronze rooster. The “Big Chicken” is in Poultry Park in the center of Gainesville, Georgia, on Jesse Jewell Parkway, named for the man who helped revolutionize the poultry business by introducing assembly line techniques for chicken processing.

Sorry, Gainesville! But the “Big Chicken” pales in comparison to the 6-foot tall rooster that sits more than 180 feet above Third Street in downtown Wilmington. That rooster belongs to the First Presbyterian Church, and has absolutely nothing to do with the poultry industry, despite First Church being in Eastern North Carolina. First Prez hired an architect named Hobart Upjohn from upstate New York to design a new sanctuary after the previous sanctuary burned in the 1920’s. The pastor at First Presbyterian, Dr. Gilmour, had traveled in Europe and admired the Gothic architecture of the churches. Many of the Protestant churches had roosters on top of their steeples. Some sources say this was to distinguish Protestant from Catholic churches.

First Prez’s former senior pastor told a reporter for the *Wilmington Star News*, “Our rooster reminds us then of our Protestant heritage. It points to the dawning of a new day, and to the joy of the resurrection. The rooster also points to Peter’s threefold

denial of Christ ‘before the cock crows,’ and so is a reminder to us not to deny our Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

Look at the upper left hand corner of the front page of today’s worship bulletin. Usually you will see the seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Today you’ll find a blue rooster clutching a cross. This rooster is the symbol of the Manhattan Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, Kansas. As the church website explains, “Simply put it is a picture of God’s grace to sinners. It is an image of Peter’s failure and Jesus Christ’s triumph. The Church is not just a community of people, but a story of sinners communing with their Savior despite their failure and because of His death on the cross. . . This is not a symbol from God’s perspective, but a symbol from our perspective. Our grasping onto the cross does not negate the reality that God has an unbreakable grasp on His children. Rather, it shows me my failure to live rightly and at the same time it shows me the only hope for my sinful heart: the cross of Jesus Christ. . . If our faith is in Christ then we share in the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Country singer and song-writer Pam Tillis co-wrote and released a song in 1993 in which she sings, “Just call me Cleopatra everybody, ‘cause I’m the queen of denial.” Sad to say, the disciple Peter might be called the “king of denial” — and, as the sermon title says, “denial is not just a river in Egypt.” In fact, denial — Peter’s denial — plays a key role in the story of Jesus’ suffering and death.

When I’m reading and studying a scripture lesson and preparing a sermon, I often find it very helpful to do what is called a “key word study.” Key words can give you a clue to the most important themes and meanings of the Bible story. Since today’s story is about Peter denying even knowing Jesus, it should be no surprise that a key word, if not **the** key word, is “deny.” In a “key word study,” you look up the key word in a concordance and note how that word is used in other Bible stories.

It just so happens that this key word — “deny” — is used in just two stories in Mark’s gospel, in chapter 8 and again here in chapter 14. The word we translate “deny” can mean “disown, renounce claim to.” Listen to how the word “deny” is used in Mark’s stories:

\* In Mark 8, the story we heard two weeks ago, Jesus asks the crucial question, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter himself gives the right answer, “You are the Messiah.” However, when Jesus begins to teach his disciples about his suffering and dying, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. But Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter. Then he calls the crowd together with his disciples and says to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them **deny** themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:334)

\* We don’t come across that word “deny” again until today’s story from Mark 14. Here’s the dialogue between Jesus and Peter:

Jesus said to Peter, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will **deny** me three times.”

But Peter said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not **deny** you.”

Later in the story, that word — “deny” — rears its ugly head once again:

One of the servant-girls stared at Peter and said, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” But Peter **denied** it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.”

The servant-girl began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” But again Peter **denied** it.

After the cock crowed for the second time, Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice, you will **deny** me three times.”

How significant that Jesus teaches his disciples that if we want to follow him, we must deny ourselves. But, when Peter had the chance to follow Jesus there in the courtyard by the fire, Peter didn’t deny himself — he denied Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lost his life in a Nazi prison camp precisely because he did not deny Jesus, knew something first-hand about the relationship between discipleship and the cross. In a devotion, after quoting Jesus who said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself,” Bonhoeffer writes, “Just as Peter, in denying Christ, said, ‘I do not know the man,’ so also should each disciple say this to herself or himself. Self-denial can never be defined as some profusion — be it ever so great — of individual acts of self-torment or of asceticism. It is not suicide, since there, too, a person’s self-will can yet assert itself. Self-denial means knowing only Christ, and no longer oneself. It means seeing only Christ, who goes ahead of us, and no longer the path that is too difficult for us. Again, self-denial is saying only: He goes ahead of us; hold fast to him.”<sup>3</sup>

To my knowledge, I’ve never point-blank denied Jesus as Lord and Savior — at least, not the way Peter did as he was warming himself by the fire in the high priest’s courtyard. Have you? Have you ever said to someone who asked you about Jesus Christ, “I don’t know or understand what you are talking about. I don’t know the man”?

And yet, if I wag my finger at Peter for being the king of denial, then the old saying is true — “There are four fingers pointing back at me!” How many times do we deny Jesus, not by what we say, but by what we don’t say? When we don’t speak up and say the right thing? How many times do we deny Jesus, not by what we do, but by what we don’t do? When we don’t take a stand, when we don’t do the right thing?

Why did Peter deny even knowing Jesus? More than that, why did Peter call down a curse upon himself there in the courtyard? The Good News Translation has Peter say, “I swear that I am telling the truth! May God punish me if I am not! I do not know the man you are talking about!”

Why did Peter deny Jesus? It comes down to fear and self-preservation. Peter is remembered as the impetuous disciples, the man who spoke and acted before he thought about what he was doing. But Peter must have made the calculations there in the courtyard. If Jesus was on trial for his life upstairs before the religious leaders, then he, Peter the lead disciple, might be next!

And that, my friends, keeps this story from being just an interesting tale from the Bible and the chance to shake our heads and “tsk-tsk” Peter for his unfaithfulness to Jesus. Whenever we put ourselves before Jesus — whenever we get ahead of Jesus on this life journey — whenever we deny knowing Jesus, especially in what we **don’t** say and **don’t** do, we need to find a rooster somewhere and take a good, long look and be reminded, as Rev. Ernie Thompson said, “not to deny our Lord.”

Our second hymn today, “Ah, Holy Jesus,” brings this story of Peter’s denial to a very personal level. Its author, Johann Heermann, wrote the hymn in the midst of very difficult times. Heermann was the only one of five children to survive to adulthood. He had to quit his university studies because of an eye infection. In 1613, a town near where he was serving as a minister was struck by the plague. Three years later, fire nearly destroyed the town where he lived and ministered. His wife died in 1617. The Thirty Years’ War began in 1618. He developed severe throat problems in 1623 that affected his ability to preach. Between 1629 and 1634, his town was raided four times. He lost almost everything he owned and was almost killed several times.<sup>4</sup>

Heermann wrote “Ah, Holy Jesus” in 1630, in the midst of these trying times. But, as one person has said, instead of asking “Why me?” Heermann asked “Why thee?” “In ‘Ah, Holy Jesus,’ he asks why Jesus had to suffer. Who was responsible for Jesus’ death? His answer was that he, Johann Heermann, was responsible.”<sup>5</sup>

*Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!  
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;  
I crucified thee.*

As someone has rightly pointed out, “‘Ah, Holy Jesus’ continues to challenge Christians today; pushing us to realize it was our personal sins that put Jesus on the cross. And beyond that, Heermann’s hymn points us to a proper response, beautifully reminding us that Jesus’ death for our salvation calls for us to adore and worship him.”<sup>6</sup>

*Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay thee,  
I do adore thee, and will every pray thee,  
think on thy pity and thy love unswerving,  
not my deserving.*

As serious as it was in Peter’s life and is in our lives, thank God denial is not the final word. As Rev. Thompson said about the rooster atop First Prez, “It points to the dawning of a new day, and to the joy of the resurrection.” Yes, Peter denied Jesus three times, but Jesus didn’t reject him. In fact, later on, after the resurrection, Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Then he gave Peter a job to do — “Feed my sheep.”

Each of us may be the king or queen of denial in our own way when it comes to being disciples of Jesus Christ.

But there's no denying this: Jesus died for you and me. And Jesus still calls us to deny ourselves and follow him.

***Let us pray: Eternal God, holy and faithful, what can we give in return for our life? Teach us to take up the cross of Christ with grateful hearts and humble spirits, offering all for the sake of the gospel, so that we may receive life in fullness; through Christ, your beloved Son, our Lord. Amen.***

***Congregational Response to the Sermon  
“Shadows Lengthen Into Night”***

*In a grove of olive trees underneath a darkening sky,  
Jesus warns as he foresees: Peter also will deny.  
Shadows lengthen into night.*

*While the web of darkness grows, Jesus suffers through his trial.  
As the herald rooster crows, Peter speaks his third denial.  
Shadows lengthen into night.*

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Information about the rooster atop First Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, NC is taken from Ken Little, “What does the rooster atop the First Presbyterian Church steeple represent?” at [www.myreporter.com](http://www.myreporter.com).

<sup>2</sup>“Why the Rooster Symbol?” at [www.manhattanpres.com](http://www.manhattanpres.com).

<sup>3</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Discipleship and the Cross,” in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 49-50.

<sup>4</sup>Evan Collins, “Ah, Holy Jesus,” at [www.etymologyofhymns.blogspot.com](http://www.etymologyofhymns.blogspot.com).

<sup>5</sup>Richard Niell Donovan, “Hymn Story: Ah, Holy Jesus,” [www.lectionary.org](http://www.lectionary.org).

<sup>6</sup>“Hymn Story,” [www.songsandhymns.org](http://www.songsandhymns.org).