The church calendar has two parts—the festival half, from Advent through Pentecost; and the church half—most of the summer and the fall, the Sundays after Pentecost. During the first half, we recall the history of our Lord Jesus, and during the second half, we reflect on the consequences for our faith, for the church, of what took place during that first half. It is as though during the first half we answer the question “What happened?” and during the second half the question “So what?”

But, looking at today’s Gospel, I wonder if this isn’t the actual pivot point of the church year, the point at which we begin to face squarely the question of “So what?” And we do this through the eyes, the experience of Simon Peter.

At the beginning of this Gospel, Peter is “post-Easter,” but he has not absorbed any of its meaning, apparently. Although in last Sunday’s Gospel he was “amazed” to find that Jesus was not in his tomb, and although he has gone back to Galilee as instructed, there seem to be no particular implications for his life. No direction, no mission.

But by the end of this Gospel, Peter has been catapulted into a new sort of following of Jesus, when Jesus says, “Follow me.” We sense that, having thrice proclaimed his sure love of Jesus, and told that he will suffer for him, now Peter is ready to follow Christ into the world, as the first missionary.

What a huge transition! Very much like the transition of Paul in our first reading. He began with his heart full of anger at Christians, eager to throw them into prison. But by the end, he is proclaiming Christ as the Son of God. He has become one who “belongs to The Way,” as the text refers to Christians. [And I have a feeling the T should be capitalized. Christians were people who belonged to “The Way,” which Christ himself had proclaimed himself to be, and was in fact. They did not just belong to a habit or a way of acting.]

Whiplash. At the beginning of the Gospel, Simon Peter says, “Well, guys, I guess I’ll go fishing.” He does what he feels like doing. Which is what Jesus tells him he used to do when he was young. “You used to put on your own belt, and go wherever you wanted to go.” But in the end, Jesus told him, for Jesus’ sake he would allow someone else to put a belt around him and take him where he did not want to go!

In the course of a few minutes, today’s narrative takes Simon Peter from being a man who had enjoyed some great experiences with Jesus—to being a true disciple of Jesus, eager to share the Good News.

The radical turnabout of Peter in today’s story seems a little like a story I read in the news this week.

A man police say was speeding is in deeper trouble after they say he led California Highway Patrol officers on a high-speed chase in Monterey County where he ended up at a beach, ran across sand dunes and tried to escape by swimming away in the ocean.
KTVU-TV reports Marina police Cmdr. Bob Nolan says the man was driving on Highway 101 through the city Tuesday afternoon when CHP officers tried to pull him over.

Nolan says after accelerating to 100 miles per hour, the man eventually stopped his car and ran to Marina State Beach with CHP officers, Marina police and California State Parks police in pursuit.

After making it past a set of waves and swimming out into deeper water, Nolan says the suspect gave up and swam back to shore.

Police did not immediately release the man’s name.

We can see what turned this man around. He realized how far it was to dry ground, in the direction he was growing! He realized how hopeless his situation was. Reluctantly, he returned to shore.

But what turned Peter around? What made him give up the aimlessness of his post-Easter life? It was something quite different, but just as great. His love for the One who loved him, his Lord Jesus. And it turned out, there were consequences for him, of the amazing thing that had returned Jesus to him.

What in the world happened? How did Peter pick up on the “so what?” of the crucifixion and resurrection and everything else about Jesus?

After that breakfast on the beach, with the one who turned out to be Jesus, although at first they didn’t know who he was, after that breakfast on the beach, Jesus turned to Simon Peter and asked him, three times, whether he loved him. It was as though he wanted to erase the memory of the three times Peter had denied even knowing him. Now he asked, “Do you love me?” And each time, Simon Peter was emphatic. Each time, Jesus spelled out the consequence of that love.

Because Jesus loved Peter enough to forgive him for not “being there for him,” for denying him; and because Peter loved Jesus as his Lord; there would be a “so what?” that would direct his life from then on.

What did Jesus mean, by asking “Do you love me?”

He did not just mean, “Do you think I’m really great?” He did not mean “Are we friends? Can we do stuff together?”

When Jesus said “me,” he was asking whether Simon Peter loved Jesus as the one who presented God to the world as the Good Samaritan; as the one who seeks out the lost, the least, the lonely; who lifts up the lowly; who forgives sinners; who is making peace in the world. He was asking Simon Peter something as comprehensive as what we sometimes summarize in the Apostles’ Creed, but in much more formulaic language, although we mean the same thing. He was asking Simon Peter for a confession like that of Thomas in last Sunday’s Gospel.

I heard something similar on the news last week, although it was not about Christian faith. A coach was talking admiringly about one of his basketball players on the national championship team. “She competes for the national championship every minute of every day, in everything she does.” That is what it is like, to really, really love something. Your concern for it, your
desire for it, infects and affects absolutely everything you do. Simon Peter’s declaration of faith-as-love was something like that. And it would have consequences unfathomable—leading even to his willingness to die for Jesus.

Well, the man in Marina, California, finally gave up and turned to shore, allowing them to handcuff him and take him “where he did not wish to go.” Jesus just as truly handcuffed our Simon Peter. Or, he elicited from Peter a confession of faith that amounted to his binding himself to Christ as his Lord and his God, the one for whom he would live henceforth.

And it is because of that consequential exchange, that turnaround at the Sea of Tiberias, that we are the church today. We gather this morning to share that same “breakfast,” not of fish and bread but of bread and wine. Like Peter, we know that only in this direction is there forgiveness, and peace, and life eternal. Amen.