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All Saints Episcopal Church

Today's gospel story comes from the last chapter of John, which is considered to be a sort of 'epilogue' written by one or more members of the Johannine community, but not by the original writer. There is no clear answer to the question of why this chapter was added, but there are a variety of suppositions and, therefore, a number of angles from which to approach this passage.

One of the oddest experiences of Easter for me is that it can feel empty after the graphic realities of Holy Week: bread broken, feet washed, nails hammered, crosses raised, a body laid in a newly hewn grave. Easter, by contrast, is about an absence: the person that the disciples knew and loved is no longer with them. It is no different than when we experience a death: there is an emptiness in our lives; we are fearful; we don't know how to act; we don't know what to say or think; we don't know who we are without the one who has died.

When we don't know what to do, sometimes revert to something that we have always done, or something that is very familiar. We want to eat 'comfort food;' we want to be around the people we know best. Peter announces he's going fishing, and several of the disciples decide to go along.

It seems that Peter has returned to what he knows; amid the confusion and grief in the aftermath of the crucifixion, he feels most like himself aboard a fishing boat, handling the heavy nets throughout the cold night. His efforts are fruitless, though; after a night of fishing, the group has caught nothing. On top of his grief, and his sense of having failed Jesus, Peter is now confronted with failing at something he has done all his life.

But as the dawn breaks, the disciples see a man on the shore, and they see the smoke from a small fire. The stranger calls out to them and suggests something very odd: cast your nets on the other side of the boat, he shouts across the water. Surprisingly, the disciples comply - and suddenly the net is full to bursting with fish!

Suddenly Peter realizes that he has seen something like this before: on a hillside, with thousands of people, he watched Jesus break bread and fish until they were all fed. He remembers a wedding in Cana, when water was turned into wine of the

highest quality. The beloved disciple shouts: "It is the Lord!" and Peter scrambles toward the shore with his heart bursting with excitement.

It is, in fact, Jesus, and he invites them to come have breakfast, as though this was just a normal morning after a night of fishing. The disciples look with amazement at each other across the fire and wonder if this is real.

After breakfast, Jesus has some very specific business with Peter.

Before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus told Peter that he would deny him, and sadly, his prediction comes true. Peter is accosted three times by bystanders as he waits outside while Jesus is being interviewed, and each time, he denies knowing Jesus. He is absent from the crucifixion. He hides behind locked doors out of fear. Now Jesus speaks to him directly: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Jesus asks him three times, and three times Peter affirms his love for Jesus.

Jesus gives Peter a chance to regain his sense of belonging.

We all need to feel accepted by a larger group in order to have a stable identity and sense of self. Peter is given the opportunity to undo his denial of Jesus with three affirmations of his love. He might not realize it at the time, but I bet that later on it dawns on him that Jesus is not testing him, but is reinstating him to the community of believers by allowing him to confess his love for Jesus the same number of times that he denied him earlier. Jesus is drawing Peter back into the community to which he belongs and accepts him for who he is.

Each time Peter answers, Jesus tells him what to do with that love: feed the flock.

We all need a sense of purpose as well as a sense of belonging - the belief that what we do matters, that if we did not show up, people would notice. Purpose is one of the great motivators in the world. Believing that we have something of value to contribute draws us again and again into challenging conditions with joy.

In response to each of Peter's confessions, Jesus responds by giving him good work to do: feed my sheep. Be a leader. Look out for these others. Devote yourself to this community. Peter is brought back into the community of the faithful, given a sense of belonging, and given a purpose.

Though the word "forgiveness" never appears in this story, it is nevertheless also a critical theme. Peter, the impetuous, big-mouthed disciple, gave in to fear, and failed to acknowledge Jesus, failed to stick around for the bitter end. Now Peter is given the opportunity to face his risen Lord and begin again.

This story also offers some of the deepest implications of Resurrection for us: we are forgiven. We are invited to start over. We are invited to belong and we are completely loved. And we have a job to do. This isn't only Peter's story; it's our story, too. When fear holds us back, love calls us forward. When we feel trapped by the way things have always been, Jesus invites us to cast our nets on the other side of the boat - to change our perspective.

So what does this mean for us? Are we held back from the abundant life Jesus promises by guilt, shame or fear? If we understood ourselves to be completely forgiven, completely loved, and completely free, how would that change the choices we make about our work? Our money? Our relationships?

The light of resurrection, shining on us, invites us to look clearly at how we have made choices out of fear rather than love, and to move away from the fears that bind us.

We are called not only to proclaim God's love, known to us in Jesus, but to act on it. That means setting aside fear, and the way fear binds us into small lives; and embracing love as the basis of every action we undertake.

God's love, set loose in the world in the Resurrection, needs our hands and feet and hearts to make it concrete in our place and time. Like Peter, we're invited to change our perspective, and cast our nets where the love of God is available for us and there's plenty for everyone.

Jesus invites us: Come and have breakfast.

In the morning light of Resurrection, there is no room for guilt and fear. We are forgiven, loved, and free, and we have some sheep to feed.