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When we open our text from John, the disciples seem to have gone back to their old ways. They seem to have gone backwards, quickly forgetting the hope of the resurrection. Peter seems to have returned to the life of a failed fisherman, giving up on the mission Christ gave to him and the other disciples in just the previous chapter. As we read this passage it is easy to look at the text and wonder just how fickle the disciples are, to see this as just another chapter in their aimless disorientation. As just another one of Peter's dumb ideas. As one final attempt to give hope to the hopeless disciples, who never really get it. By now they have seen the risen Christ three times, according to John, and seem completely unmoved by the experience. It seems that Peter has returned to his empty nets, to a life without meaning, to a life that looks exactly like the life he had before encountering the Christ. It seems that the grace Christ has poured out in their lives was resistible, that witnessing the risen Christ was not enough, which would leave little hope for the rest of us.

But maybe that is not what John is trying to tell us, maybe we are not supposed to look at this scene of people who are unmoved, unchanged by the resurrection but as those who have been completely change, but are still terrible fisherman. Who really should quit their day jobs. Maybe this scene is not a final scene of disciples who just never seem to get it, but the birth of something new. Of those who experienced the irresistible grace of God, and have been so moved. Maybe this scene is the beginnings of a new creation, sown by God's grace, raised by the resurrection. As day breaks in this scene, we see the morning light shine on something completely different than anything that has existed before. We find disciples who cannot walk away from the empty tomb, and the risen Christ the same as they were before.

John introduces this scene by telling us that the disciples were gathered together. Not only that, but they are gathered together outside, finally beyond locked doors. In the previous two appearances of the risen Jesus, we find the disciples behind closed doors, afraid and cowering. We find them still imprisoned by fear, but now they are set free by their risen Lord. Now they are gathered together by the sea, no longer bound by fear of anything in all creation. By the mission they have been given, they have been freed. John does not give us the reason for their gathering, but maybe this gathering of Peter who raced to find an empty tomb, and of Thomas who stuck his fingers in Christ's wounds was the creation of the new community. A community of those who have witnessed the risen Lord, and have had their fears conquered, who leave the safety of closed doors to go out into the world, speaking of Jesus who is ever present in our worship. Instead of a tragic scene that is all too characteristic for the disciples, we witness the first gathering, the first church service. We see the birth of this community who announces that the world they knew, the world they feared is no more. This tiny, fragile community which joyously sings of their forgiveness.

We find the creation of the same community which still gathers today, which still announces the hope of the resurrection. We find our community which announces hope with the same voice. What we witness then in this scene is not more of the same but the birth of something new, with those who fled from the cross, who have encountered their risen Lord and been transformed by an experience of grace, even if they remain terrible fisherman. In the creation of this new community, we find hope for ourselves, who leave the cross, and look for a way to make sense of it, who look for a way to move forward in this new light we have seen. And in true Church style, this first gathering ends with a potluck supper, but those gathered at this first gathering, are not so lucky. They are unable to catch anything.

I hate fishing, and believe me I've tried. Every time I have tried my hand at fishing, I am just as bad as the disciples. I never catch anything. I have tried going right after the fish were stocked, and I would go out so full of hope and excitement. And nothing, I would get nothing. Quickly my excitement would dissipate, and I would end up only catching myself a few times. It was awful, I have no idea why anyone would want to do it, especially so early in the morning, over and over again. In this first Church gathering, we find the same frustration. And I am sure we find them wondering, why would anyone want to do this, especially in the morning, and if this is something we are going to have to do over and over again. We find the disciples gathered for the first time, with empty nets. They go out in excitement and have nothing, they go out with a mission and goal, and nothing, nothing but their empty nets.

Already in their first gathering, we find frustration, some fruitlessness, we find disillusionment, we find empty nets. Even as this new day dawns, as we leave the cross and empty tomb excited to go out sharing the Good News, announcing the love our God has for us, it is not so easy. In fact, we discover that the easiest thing to do is to be frustrated, to get tired of same Church calendar, the same predictable lectionary, to bemoan the same hymns, the same people year after year. As we leave the cross for another year, we find our excitement fade, we feel our joy die down. We leave Easter discovering that this is not the journey we imagined, this is not how you expected your life to go, after listening to the preacher go on for so long you do not find yourself any fuller than you started off. Maybe you even feel emptier, lonelier, more unfulfilled than when this journey began. We find the same empty nets we too often get frustrated with, we find loss when we expect, and are told by some that we should experience favor, we find stagnation when we expect to find continual growth. We experience emptiness when we expect to be filled to the brim. We leave Easter hoping to experience the same

emotional highs, but are left with empty nets, feeling stale and unfulfilled. We leave Easter emptier than we expected, disappointed, hoping there is more to this than our empty nets. From the very beginning we find the hardships of being the Church, the difficulties of singing an endless hymn of praise when we are frustrated and cannot raise our voices in song.

As the day breaks, and new light shines, Jesus appears on shore and calls to the disciples, calling them children. And He asks them the last question that a failed fisherman, or frustrated faithful, wants to hear, He asks them how it is going. After a night filled with empty nets, Jesus calls to His disciples, calling all who wallow unsatisfied, children. Jesus breaks into this first unfruitful gathering, to those who did not expect His presence and calls to them with the intimacy of one who knows them asking them how it is going. And the answer we begrudgingly give with them is, not well. But not to worry, Jesus has an idea, to simply move it to the other side, not exactly earth shattering. Even as they do not recognize Christ on the shore, His words throw them into action. His gentle voice tells them to move their heavy nets after a night of fruitless work, and by the power of His voice even when it is not recognized they follow, and He tells them they will find some fish, but they find more than some fish. John tells us that there are so many that they cannot even haul them into the boat. Finally their nets are filled, and that is the moral of the story, right? No.

The Beloved Disciple recognizes who called out to them, He has experienced Christ's presence and work in his life, and can recognize it before him, he announces to Peter, "it is the Lord". Peter forgets about the fish entirely, he hurriedly gets dressed and jumps into the sea. When the disciples arrive on shore, they find Jesus sitting by a charcoal fire, with fish already on it, and some bread. They recognize Jesus and He commands them to eat with Him. They bring the nets ashore, but their nets empty or filled are not the point anymore, maybe they never really

were. Christ is what they have been longing for the most, they have been thirsting for His gentle voice and it is the sound of His voice which gives these tired fisherman the strength to rush to the shore. He feeds their hungry bodies and souls. The words that the Beloved Disciple declares “it is the Lord”, is enough to fill our empty nets, and it has been enough to fill our empty nets ever since this first gathering. It is the Lord, is enough to fill your lives no matter how empty and unfulfilled they feel, it is the Lord, is enough to keep you going even when your faith feels like it has gone stale and lifeless. It is the Lord, is what continues to fill our work and worship with joy even as we read the same lectionary and sing the same hymns. It is the Lord, and that fills the emptiness.

That is what leads Peter into the personal encounter with Jesus that concludes our reading. In this final scene, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him, and Peter tells his Lord that he loves Him three times. In response Jesus tells Peter, the failed fisherman, the man with empty nets, the man who is frustrated and unfulfilled, to feed His lambs. Even though you will surely continue to have empty nets, I am entrusting to you, my sheep, those who I care for, you will feed my lambs. At this first gathering of the Church, this ragtag bunch of failed fisherman, and lackluster disciples, who already have these empty nets, these empty nets we continue to carry around today, are commanded to feed Jesus’ sheep. Jesus is not going to accept the empty nets as an excuse to ignore this command. Peter has proven that he cannot catch a single fish, but he is commanded to give the helpless and hungry sheep that Jesus brings to us, good food, food that will not rot or leave them hungry, but food that nourishes that hungry soul, food that comforts the struggling lambs. To feed them by continually looking out from the boat and declaring, it is the Lord. To feed them with a never ending supply of God’s grace, to never stop speaking of God’s steadfast love.