*Assist us mercifully, O Lord, in these our supplications and*

*prayers, and dispose the way of thy servants towards the*

*attainment of everlasting salvation; that, among all the*

*changes and chances of this mortal life, they may ever be*

*defended by thy gracious and ready help; In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

I kind of love the idea of the Peter and the other disciples getting out to the seashore, especially after all the terror of the passion and the triumph of the empty tomb. Last week, we heard one of St. John's accounts of how Jesus appeared to his friends after his resurrection. You might remember that they were huddled together in a house with the door locked up tight. Jesus came to see them, ignoring all that business with the locked doors and addressed his friends by bidding his peace. Thomas, out on some unknown errand, got to see Jesus for a return engagement, and when Thomas saw the Risen Lord, acclaimed him as Lord and God.

In fact, all of the twentieth chapter of St. John's account of the Gospel is intense. Before that locked up house, we read about the shock of the empty tomb, and how Peter and the beloved disciple searched for Jesus, and in their confusion only found the evidence of his burial. We read about how some angels appeared to Mary Magdalene and pointed them to Jesus, who, when she recognized him, surprised and delighted her with his resurrected presence. A lot happens in chapter 20, so again, it's nice to see the disciples more or less laying aside the fear and anxiety of the preceding chapters and getting out to the boat to catch some fish together.

Or at least, try to catch some fish. John tells us that the nets were empty at that first cast. But Jesus appeared to them from the beach (though they didn't realize that it was him) and gave some of the best fish advice in the history of fish advice, telling them to set the net on the other side of the boat. What was originally an empty net, was now so heavy with fish, they couldn't even haul it in without sinking the boat. John tells us the beloved disciple was the first one to realize that Jesus was the one behind this amazing haul and Peter, weirdly naked, puts on his clothes and charged the shore to meet Jesus again. Then, they come to a fire and have a breakfast of fish and bread together. It's a beautifully simple scene of water, fish, friends, and breakfast; even as it is adorned with power of the risen Jesus and his command of creation. Again, as we can enjoy this as a picture of a final hangout with the Risen Lord, there are all sorts of little callbacks to the story that John has been telling us for the past twenty-one chapters. We might recall the multiplication of fish, and the loaves that went them for a huge meal. We might remember, Jesus' gracious power over the waters: calming the seas and walking upon them.

But one detail, one callback has long delighted careful readers of this story. St. John is keen to direct us to the image of a charcoal fire, and clearly wants us to see Jesus and Peter coming into the scene together over this breakfast hearth. The last time we'd heard about a charcoal fire was back in the 18th chapter, back when Jesus was in the throes of betrayal, trial, and passion. You might recall that as John the Evangelist described the Passion narrative, careful to paint the full picture of what Jesus endured, John also returned to consider Peter as he warmed himself at the fire. You might also recall that at that first fire, this was not one of Peter's best moments. At that fire, when people asked if he knew this condemned Galilean preacher, Peter denied it three times at the rooster's call. Just as his teacher said he would. This first charcoal fire was the place of Peter's greatest shame, his abandonment of Jesus to save his hide, his own betrayal of his teacher and master while Jesus was at his most vulnerable.

Here at this new fire on the beach, though, the agony of betrayal by cockcrow is soothed by Jesus' gentle threefold call to Peter: "Do you love me?" Each time, it was an opportunity for Peter to reaffirm his affection and devotion to Jesus. Peter became emotional as Jesus asked, every time he answered becoming more urgent, more emotionally pressing. I always wonder if his three-fold abandonment at the rooster's call weighed on him as he responded to Jesus' questions.

And as Jesus and Peter became reconciled, as Jesus asked if Peter loved him, and as Peter ever more urgently responded, "Yes, Lord", Jesus gave Peter a command to tend to his flock. Again, here is a call back to earlier in the Gospel story, when Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd, when Jesus described his messianic ministry in pastoral terms. Here, Jesus would have Peter take up the work of the Shepherd, to enact that which he promised to the disciples when he breathed the Holy Spirit on them in that locked up house. Now Peter, along with all Jesus disciples, were meant to be shepherds for the world, announcing the Good News of God's reconciling love made manifest in the Risen Christ.

We often think of this as an epilogue to the main body of St. John's account of the Gospel, but I think it would be a mistake to simply write it off as fun beach scene to underscore the happy ending. Especially at the charcoal fire on the beach, we find real hope for every single one of us who has abandoned Jesus by nature of our transgression. And not only has Jesus shown us that he will restore us to his grace and join us with his beloved presence, I think it shows that he means to put us back to work in the sheepfold of his ministry. For Peter, his betrayal and restoration has echoed throughout the ages of the Church as a great figure of Christ's forgiveness. When we return to Christ in penitence, and receive his ministry of reconciliation, I think we become living examples of grace, living embodiments of Christ's Gospel.

This week, I pray we all consider well this beachside breakfast. Whenever we fear that we have fallen too far away from God and have left Jesus behind, may we ever be reminded of that fire that Jesus lit to draw back his disciples from the sea so that he could be with them, nourish them with his presence, and yes, forgive them. That same fire was lit for us on the first Easter morning, beloved, and he awaits our return.

For our God desires for us to come back to Him for our health, blessing, and life. Just as the Psalmist, we turn to God and say:

O Lord my God, I cried out to you, \*

and you restored me to health.

You brought me up, O Lord, from the dead; \*

you restored my life as I was going down to the grave.

To the risen Christ be all glory. From Age to Age. Amen.