

Reflection on the Gospel-Easter 3C
(John 21:1-19)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

March 25 this year saw the publication of Pope Francis' Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*. The Pope addresses his words to "young people and to the entire people of God". Quite early in the document, there is a call for the church to be a "living church", a church that is "attentive to the legitimate claims of those women who seek greater justice and equality" (par. 42). For Johannine scholar, Elizabeth Dowling RSM, this would entail a return to the spirit of the early chapters of John's gospel.

John's final chapter marks an unfortunate shift in the portrayal of gender roles, a shift that would seem to reflect struggles in the early church to accept women in leadership roles. The focus is clearly on Peter, on his role as leader and his relationship with Jesus. In John 20, it is not at all clear that Peter has come to resurrection faith, while there is no such doubt about the faith of Mary of Magdala. It is she who receives the first resurrection appearance and she who is commissioned to proclaim the news of the resurrection to the other disciples.

In Chapter 21, Peter goes fishing and several of the other disciples join him. They catch nothing. At dawn, they see the figure of Jesus on the shore. His disciples, with the exception of the "beloved disciple", do not recognise him immediately. They follow his instructions and find themselves overwhelmed with their catch. At the invitation of Jesus, they breakfast on bread and fish. This provides the setting for the rehabilitation of Peter, already foreshadowed in his decision to clothe his naked body. In the wake of his three-fold denial, Peter makes a three-fold profession of love of Jesus. This brings with it the responsibility of tending not only his "sheep" but also his "lambs". This command has particular resonance for a church that has failed so many of its children.

While the passage is filled with symbolism, we might pause to appreciate the materiality underlying the symbols. Fishing is an important gospel metaphor for ministry. The number of fish (153) probably denotes the universality of the mission. The 30% decline in large fish species in my country provides a sober reminder that the mission must include the natural world as never before. The unturn net is a symbol of unity, like the seamless garment in the passion narrative. The verb "to draw" has several layers of meaning in this fishing context: the disciples were not able "to draw in the net....so Simon Peter went aboard and drew the net ashore". These statements evoke earlier sayings of Jesus, particularly his words on the cross, "And I if I am lifted up from the earth will draw all to myself" (12:32). The "all" allows for the whole Earth community, human and more-than-human, to be drawn to the crucified and resurrected One, despite the failures of the past.