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St, Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year C: John 20:19-31

Some things are retained. Some things are lost. As for "losing" things, we use that word in at least two different ways: "Lost" can mean either misplaced or vanished, for the sake of this discussion. For example, when one says, "I lost my car keys," one likely means "I misplaced my car keys." But when one says, "I lost five thousand dollars at [fill in the blank]," one likely doesn't mean "I misplaced five thousand dollars." In that context, we may safely conclude that the five thousand dollars has vanished, one way or another, and you'll have some 'splainin to do.

Loss of money is generally spoken of in this way. Several other figures of speech are used in these contexts -- one of the most popular of them using the rather crass image of the toilet. "I flushed that fifty bucks down the toilet!", one might hear. You get the point, though. Regardless of the figure of speech, you know that something has vanished that cannot be replaced. It's gone forever...swept up into something much bigger than us that we can neither truly discover nor precisely identify.

Have you ever gone to one of those automatic, touchless car washes where you insert the money directly into a machine before entering? Needless to say, I have...many times. Some might say

that they are a place where one's hard-earned money can simply vanish -- down a drain, too -- and, given the quality of some of the wash jobs they provide, such an observation isn't too far off. But I remember one place -- a car wash back in North Dakota -- where my money literally vanished.

There, I had, of course, chosen the "premium" wash, even though it might not have done a better job than the cheaper options. What was the price of the premium wash? Nine dollars. Okay, so what do I find in my wallet?

A ten-dollar bill...but guess what? The machine didn't take ten-dollar bills! And not a change machine in sight!

So I had to go back to a gas station, make an unnecessary purchase (because I feel I'm obligated to), and return to the car wash with my five-dollar bill -- which was acceptable -- and four ones. Now I'm ready to go.

It was a breezy day, not unusual for the region, but still, I wasn't prepared for what the breeze was going to do at this point. As I fiddled with my newly acquired five-dollar bill, suddenly the wind swept my precious currency away.

I certainly hope that -- wherever my five-dollar bill went -- it fell into good hands and was put to good use. Maybe it tumbled its way up into Canada and found a favorable exchange rate. Who knows?

Experiences like that are humbling. Certainly, we waste money all the time, but never was it -- for me, at least -- so obvious how five dollars could simply vanish...never having had the chance to be put to some good use.

And no, I'm not going to wait for that five-dollar bill to make its way back to me, because I could be waiting for a long, long time. What would be the point of that? Hopefully, as Christians, we see that "loss" isn't always bad. It just depends on what you're "losing."

Which gets us into this morning's Gospel text...

Immediately after the resurrection, the disciples were locked up in some house "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19), and, not knowing entirely what was going on, they have a visitor...one who apparently could pass through walls or could be beamed in or something like that. The visitor was Jesus. He returned with a very specific purpose, which directly relates to the concept I introduced earlier.

First, a greeting -- "Peace be with you" (20:19, 21). But that's not the end of it. He bestows upon the disciples the Holy Spirit (20:22). You may ask, "What is this?" To put it as simply as possible, Jesus is giving them the Spirit, the Breath, the life-force, if you will. He gives them the Spirit to continue the work that he did himself. And what was that work? Let's read on...

John, chapter 20, verse 23: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

That's right! The disciples are being called to the same work to which Jesus was called -- the forgiveness of sins -- except that, unlike Jesus, they cannot die for someone's sins. What they can do, however, is bind and loose (retain and forgive) the sins of people through the proclamation of God's Word, which announces, in particular, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.

And whatever the disciples decide to do, Jesus makes it pretty clear that it's in their hands now. This is going to be a big part of their post-resurrection ministry. If they forgive, all is forgiven; if they don't, well...then what happens? Certainly, as Episcopalians, we have orders of ministry (such as priest and bishop) to offer rites of confession and absolution, and, for example, I have said the words found on page 448 of the Prayer Book: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive you all your offenses; and by his authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins..." And, of course, the Scriptural basis for all of this is texts such as John 20. Priests, in this instance, carry on the work that the disciples themselves were called to.

But isn't God the One who forgives sins in the end? And what

about not forgiving? Whose job description are we talking about here, anyway? Think about it this way: If the governor of a state grants clemency to a prisoner on death row, it is not the governor's personal doing; rather it is the state's doing through the office of the governor. We speak similarly of the Church's work through the orders of ministry; I do not personally forgive you when I announce forgiveness, I do so through the office with which the Church has entrusted me.

Now, this can be a difficult point to get across in a culture where everything is personal -- including salvation. Actually, the individualizing of salvation is a product more of American religious culture than of anything Scriptural or historical. Thus, we ought not think of the means by which we are saved as the sole property of God and the individual person. A community called "the church" and an office called "the ministry" have something to do with it as well. Why would've Jesus bothered sending the disciples forth to forgive sins if all the work could've been done on one's own?

But what about this language of retention? Earlier, I said, "Some things are retained." Is that a good thing, especially after relating forgiveness to loosing or loosening, or, perhaps, losing? Let's look at this morning's text again. We read, "If you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20:23b). Now, isn't that odd? I might conclude, "When I do not forgive others, God won't forgive them, either." Again, this is the prob-

lem we get into when we think about this matter personally.

Sure, given one's knowledge of Scripture, the works of Jesus Christ, and the needs of the Church, one may, on that basis, withhold forgiveness, too. But think back to the example of the governor -- sometimes that governor might not grant clemency, again not because he holds some grudge against the prisoner, but because it wouldn't be in the best interests of the state.

Viewed similarly, one might have to say "no" to forgiveness or absolution on occasion because that person needs a bit more time to think things over...then it may be granted.

When you deal with this in your own lives, please don't feel obligated to grant forgiveness to a person before you're really ready -- no good in doing that, either!

And what I will say about the personal dimension of retaining sins is that the wound of sin will fester when we constantly refuse to forgive. These types of situations arise when there are quarrels and disputes between acquaintances...and, sometimes, even friends. They may drag on for years, and, in such circumstances, "retaining" the sins of another leads to all sorts of unhealthy stuff...none of which Jesus intended for the disciples whom he sent out!

Yes, some things need to be retained...occasionally. But many things need to be lost, like the weight of grudges that can dig into our side and produce festering sores on our souls. As for

the things we do lose, like that five-dollar bill of mine, it doesn't do us any good to sit around and mourn their absence. Just accept the fact that they very likely may never come back to you. There's an old episode of M*A*S*H where Major Houlihan's wedding ring got lost in the garbage, so the crew at the 4077th summoned a local peddler with access to a copy. Klinger, whom Major Houlihan held accountable for the ring's disappearance, then presented that ring to her as if he had found the original, but when she discovered an error in its inscription, she became enraged that it wasn't the original. Klinger told her, "Major, that's not fair. We were just trying to help."

She then took some time to reconsider how she treated Klinger and the others...

Some things are retained. Some things are lost. As long as the loss of things like wedding rings and five-dollar bills doesn't lead us to retain frustration, blame, and grudge against someone, we've probably become pretty good at the "loss" known as forgiveness. We need to let some things vanish and disappear, because otherwise their constant specter becomes a menace and burden. We cannot retain everything...nor should we.

God is pretty much the same, one might argue. As the disciples were called to carry on Jesus' ministry of forgiveness, so too are we called to both give and receive that very same thing Jesus offered us first of all on the cross. If God never nei-

ther "misplaces" nor "loses" anything -- apart from sin -- think of how wondrous his gift of forgiveness truly is. He knows what need not be retained, and, yes, he knows what ought to be lost. If it's sin, may it fly out of the sight of even God!

That's what forgiveness should feel like...

Amen.