

Feasting, Feeding, Following

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John 21:1-19

We say Christ is risen. Not Christ *has* risen, or Christ rose. The empty tomb is not a one-off, past tense occurrence, but an ongoing reality. We are called to do what poet Wendell Berry suggests: “practice resurrection.” My church’s youth choir sang an anthem that is still in my head decades later: “*Every morning is Easter morning from now on.*”

To help us remember that, the gospels, to varying degrees, include what the scholars call “post-resurrection appearances.” Some are brief. Some are contested. Some are extensive. All of them end with Jesus’ ascension, which marks with a finality Jesus’ physical presence on earth. Our Presbyterian tradition has not done much with the ascension, but it’s helpful to remember that Jesus must ascend before the Spirit can come, and the church’s history begins to unfold. But not quite yet. Not quite yet.

Some days after Jesus appeared to Thomas, the disciples had returned to the north country. There was no playbook to follow after their messiah rose – the one they had followed, been devoted to, praised, abandoned, celebrated – no playbook at all. What an important existential question for them, and for us. How will we live having experienced the resurrection? What difference will it make?

The disciples went back to work, fishing. But the fish weren’t biting, or, in this case, jumping into the net. Just after daybreak, someone appears. We know it’s Jesus; they did not. He tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. They do, and guess what. Full nets.

On shore, they discover a charcoal fire burning, with fish already cooking, and bread.

A curious moment. Did you catch it? 153 fish. Who counted? The commentators aren't quite sure what to do with that. Many think 153 is significant, but none know why. Anyway.

The meal is shared. It is kind of an uneasy meal, to which we will return, because the disciples believe it is Jesus, but aren't quite sure.

The meal ends and the conversation quickly pivots. Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him. Yes, you know I do. "Then feed my lambs." Same question, a second time. Do you love me? Same response. Yes. "Tend my sheep." Jesus asks Peter the same question a third time, and by now, Peter is hurt, and I also bet he is some other things. I would have been. Yes, I love you. "Feed my sheep." A third time. Did Peter get it? Do we?

Jesus concludes the whole encounter with two simple words – "follow me."

Notice the rhythm. It is impressively alliterative. Feasting. Feeding. Following. It's actually fishing, feasting, feeding, following, but that is more alliteration than we can possibly handle this morning.

Notice also that it's not a linear progression, but circular, and cyclical. We encounter and recognize Jesus. He feeds us. Then he calls us to feed others. And we become true followers, true disciples, as we've been fed, and as we feed.

As I said, the post-resurrection appearances have been contested. That is to say, biblical scholars disagree about them. In fact, if you look at the end of John's gospel, you'll read a paragraph that sounds like an ending, and then a whole new chapter follows. Some scholars think it was tacked on later; others think it wasn't. Since I am not a Bible scholar, I will take it at face value, and be thankful that we get this feasting, feeding, following rhythm, with all of its implications.

Sandra Schneiders, in a fine book about John's gospel, summarizes all of this. She writes of the connected relationship between contemplation and mission, between recognizing Jesus and being sent out in his name. She writes: "Contemplative receptivity to the life-giving revelation in Jesus is the source of the church's proclamation, which grounds both the faith of the disciples and the church's mission to the world..." ("Written That You May Believe," page 205)

That's a rigorous sentence. "Contemplative receptivity to the life-giving revelation in Jesus is the source of the church's proclamation, which grounds both the faith of the disciples and the church's mission to the world..." Our faith comes from our capacity to be open to Jesus when he appears, and that same faith sends us out to serve the risen Christ in the world.

No spirituality without social responsibility, and hollow social responsibility without the backbone of spirituality. Feasting. Feeding. Following.

I missed all of Holy Week, and Easter. Thanks, COVID. I remain grateful, as I said last week, to my staff colleagues for going the extra mile. I missed each service; in a particular way I missed Maundy Thursday. A colleague in the presbytery visited us that night and was very grateful for that opportunity.

In many ways it all comes down to that loaf of bread, broken and shared, and that cup, poured out and shared. Since that last supper has already happened in John's gospel, the breakfast on the beach is a rehearsal, a reminder, of that meal. Jesus takes bread and gives it to them. They recognize him. That feasting leads to feeding, which leads to following.

What was the best meal you ever had? I can remember ours. Our son has just been born, very early, and a seven-week hospitalization followed before we could welcome him home. It was a long wait. It was a strange time. A few weeks later, my mom came for a long weekend – the best kind of baby-sitting. We went out for dinner to a kind of Louisiana/creole/barbeque place. The food was great. The conversation better. The company even better, not to mention the need, at that point, the important need for a little emotional and relational and spiritual recalibration after the previous few months. The best meal we ever had. What was yours? And why?

I don't know if breakfast on the beach with Jesus was the best meal the disciples ever had, though if you like fish it sounds pretty good. I do know it was the most *important*. As will this one be for us, with a menu of a little piece of gluten-free bread and a sip of grape juice, the grape juice a product of the Protestant-led temperance movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. *The most important meal*. So much happened, and happens now, echoing that breakfast on the beach. That rhythm. Feasting, feeding, following.

We have done so much with this moment. We've complicated it. Fought over it. Excluded from it. We've even given it three names – Lord's Supper, Communion, and now Eucharist is slipping into our vernacular. Eucharist means "thanksgiving," so that's good. Communion means just that – communing with God and one another. Lord's Supper is a reminder that it is his supper, not ours, not the church's.

What do you think of when you think of communion? A joyful feast? A solemn meal? Something mysterious? Sacred?

At our presbytery meeting this past Tuesday, we examined a candidate for ministry, a woman who had been a minister in our denomination, left for another, and then discerned the call to return. We write a theological statement at that point, and then are examined on it. Her statement contained what most of our statements do when considering our two sacraments – baptism and the Lord's Supper. She called them "signs" and "seals." Signs point to something – they are not the thing itself. Seals confirm what already is. Salvation, grace, divine love, are not contained in this little morsel and tiny sip; they are pointed to, and confirmed.

It used to be that one didn't participate in the Lord's Supper, even in our tradition, until a youth – that's why confirmation class is sometimes called "communicant's class." We've evolved on that. Children are now welcome. We've said that *all* are welcome, but haven't always practiced that. Our Scottish forbears practiced something called "fencing the table," whereby the minister and an elder would go from home to home on a Saturday to determine a church member's spiritual preparedness to receive the sacrament the next morning. How would you like to get your living room ready for that visit? In some places, literal barriers existed, some sat on one side, some on the other, and those deemed worthy would have produced something called a "communion token." Now, I am all for preparation – prayerful pondering before you come forward this morning. Readiness? Yes. But worthiness? I am not so sure. That might leave all of us going hungry. And how are we mindful of the unintentional barriers, fences, we might be constructing even now?

Different traditions have understood different things about what actually happens when, in a few moments, I will break that loaf of bread and pour out that cup. For some, those elements become, literally, the body and blood of Christ. That is not

what our tradition has believed. Our forbear John Calvin, ever the logical lawyer, said that if the ascension happened, then Jesus couldn't be in two places at the same time. But Calvin was quick to insist, and we have ever since, that what happens is more than a simple remembrance, a memorial, that Christ's spirit is present with us.

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote that "It is not the historical remembrance as such which provides the foundation for the Lord's supper, but the presence of the crucified one in the Spirit of the resurrection." ("The Church in the Power of the Spirit," p. 250)

Theologian William Placher wrote that "The Lord's Supper...looks forward to the great feast and backward to Jesus' last night, but more than that it experiences Christ as *present* in the shared bread and cup." ("Jesus the Savior," p. 124)

Because theologians write dissertations on this stuff, and presbyteries examine ministerial candidates on it, and because our tendency is to overcomplicate and overthink, we have done so with this, what was initiated as a simple meal with Jesus and his friends.

Moltmann wrote that "The Lord's Supper is not the practice of a theological theory. Communion with Christ in his supper is obeying Christ's own invitation, not a ... dogma." We need to remember that. And yet, it's good to think about it every so often, so we can avoid what so easily happens, doing this by rote, going through the motions.

I must admit that the longer I do what I do, the less I feel I know, and the more I am satisfied with not knowing. John Calvin, writing in the sixteenth century, suggested that that was an acceptable posture. Said Calvin: "If anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare." (Quoted in Placher, p. 125)

A mystery. Yes. A sign of hope. Yes. A remembrance. Yes. A sign of Christ's presence. Yes. And one thing more. The *feeding* of that feasting, feeding, following rhythm. It is an open feast, open to the church and world. That means that all are welcome, and it also means that we have a mission to that same world.

Feed my sheep might be a literal command – feed those who are hungry, for us meaning financial support to several mission partners, or One Great Hour of Sharing, or food donations to Germantown Avenue Crisis Ministry, or more recently, cooking together in our new kitchen for Face to Face. That it so say, when we break bread at this table in a moment, we are called to think about our call to break bread for our neighbors who hunger.

Yet “feed my sheep” must mean more than the physical filling of empty stomachs, as critical as that is. We are called to feed with other things as well – justice, mercy, compassion. That’s why thinking about poverty and racism is so important, meeting the multi-dimensional hunger needs of our neighbors, and at the same time, might I add, being fed ourselves.

There is much to ponder in all of this. But let’s not overthink or overcomplicate. Let’s remember how it started, and how it continued. This morning, let’s be willing to do what those far-from-perfect earliest followers did. They listened, and cast their nets on the other side of the boat. They shared a simple, delicious, important meal with a friend. They were encouraged, mandated, even, to serve – three times. And when invited to follow, they simply said...yes. They believed that Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Amen.