

“Joy, Disbelieving and Still Wondering”
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – April 18, 2021

PLEASE READ:
I John 3:1-7
Luke 24:36b-48

Ernest Hemingway wrote famously, "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is *a moveable feast*."

“Moveable feast” is a religious term. It refers to a holiday that falls on the same day of the week each year, but which has a date which varies, or moves. Christian moveable feasts are holy days set in relation to the date of Easter, like Palm Sunday (7 days before), Maundy Thursday (4 days before), Good Friday (3 days before), Pentecost Sunday (the 50th day after) ... There is deeper significance of a moveable feast, though. Moveable feasts point to a reality inside of you, not bound by dates, places, or food.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the Pandemic for me is that we have not been able to enjoy eating around the table together. It’s what Christians do, and we Presbyterians are known for our potlucks. “Feed them, and they will come!”

Much of Jesus’ ministry took place around the table. His first miracle was at the wedding feast of Cana changing water into wine. Jesus used the table as an expression of God’s grace toward outsiders and the unloved. Remember when Jesus invited himself to dinner at Zacheus’ house? The religious authorities ridiculed him for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. They complained he “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Lk 15.1-2). He was accused of being a “glutton and a drunk” (Mat 11.19)... Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a wedding feast. Jesus saved his most important teaching for the upper room as he redefined the Passover feast, breaking bread and pouring out wine, getting up from the table to wash feet (Jn 13) and commanding his disciples to love one another.

Finally, the two post-resurrection scenes in Luke are related to eating. The first was when the disciples were walking along the road to Emmaus and strangely they did not see who Jesus was. Only after he joined them for a meal, and he took bread, blessed and broke it, then their eyes were opened and they recognized him....

Today’s lesson continues the Emmaus story, with a comical twist. It could be a scene from the movie *Ghost Busters*! The disciples thought they were seeing a ghost and were terrified! This is completely understandable: *dead stuff is supposed to stay dead!*

Jesus comes to them saying, “Peace be with you.” He shows them his wounds. He shows them his hands and his feet. And Luke goes on to write, “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ And they gave him a piece of broiled fish...”

Loaves and fishes ... sound familiar? Perhaps this is where our minds are meant to wander around these Easter scenes of eating bread and fish. God surprisingly provides abundantly for those who hunger and thirst, far more than we can ever imagine...

Luke describes not a group of smug and confident Christians. He describes the first Easter community as having joy *mixed with disbelief and wondering...* And this gives me hope for our church today, because, if we're honest, we have our own disbelief and wondering. We cross our fingers through parts of the Creed.

I have had people come to me and say, I'm not sure I believe. Can I be part of the church? There are communities where they would not be welcome, to be sure. But as Luke describes it, *Jesus doesn't seem to worry that his disciples "were disbelieving and still wondering..."* His simple message to them was: "I'm here now! Let's eat!"

It's lost in English, but when Jesus says, "It's me," he uses a Greek form "*Ego Emi*" which harkens back to the revelation of God to Moses. "I am who I am" which for the early Jewish Christians was a powerful connection to the God who entered into history as Liberator and Provider.

This is the key theological point of this story. God is revealed in Jesus as not a God who is indifferent or removed from the suffering of our world, but as the God who enters into the suffering of the world. The God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a God who suffers *for* and *with* us. And this determines what life and life together in Christ's name is all about. As Fred Craddock (former professor of homiletics at Emory) observes, "The identification between Jesus and the resurrected Christ is critical, not just for theology but also for defining the nature of Christian life. If the Jesus who died belongs to the historical past but the one disciples now follow is the eternal Christ, then the Christian life can take on forms of spirituality that are without suffering for others, without a cross, without any engagement of issues of life in this world, all the while expressing devotion to a living, spiritual Christ."¹

The Risen Christ is the Crucified-Risen Christ who reveals the God of Self-Giving Love. We are called into a community where compassion and loving service to one another is more important than dogmatic certainty. That's why Jesus didn't try first to explain the resurrection reality, he first shows them his scars and calls them into table fellowship...

Jaroslav Pelikan, former Professor of church history at Yale for 40 years was a Greek Orthodox believer. In a lecture Kim shared with me, Pelikan notes how the Orthodox Church, in the liturgy of St. John Chrysostam, which goes back to the 4th century, begins the creed, "Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess the Holy Trinity one in essence and undivided..." Did you catch that? "Let us love one another... That we may confess."

Jesus knew that it's around the table together where you can go deeper with one another. It's around the table where we learn to listen to one another, and to hear not just what is being said, but what is not being said, and to ask questions. Around the table we learn to recognize when we need to come around one of the family, when we need to celebrate one of the family, when we need to challenge one of the family...

¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 290.

Christian community means pursuing more authentic relationships in community. It's about *vulnerability*. As I mentioned last week, the Latin root *vulnus*, means *wound*. And I have news for you, being vulnerable is typically not going to happen in the sanctuary. It happens when we spend time together as friends and family, when we eat and drink together, when we muster the courage to show our scars, when we learn to pray, serve and love together...

In John's letter, he writes that we are called children of God. He also writes also that we will be like Christ. I remember my Dad using the phrase, you are what you eat. Eugene Peterson put it this way, "Don't just take notes on the sermon: [holding up the Bible] eat this Book!" We are called, like the prophet Ezekiel (3.1), to be eating Scripture, taking in the words of life, like the Psalmist to learn that the Word of God is sweeter than honey. The Risen Christ commanded his disciples to feed his sheep, or as C.S. Lewis wryly put it in *Letters to Malcolm*, "the charge to Peter was Feed my sheep; not Try experiments on my rats, or... Teach my performing dogs' new tricks."

Jesus puts it this way: "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations... You are witnesses of these things..."

Here the Gospel is reduced to a few simple phrases. Luke summarizes the atoning work of Christ. The anointed one of God is willing to become the victim, not retaliate, but to suffer for love. And the victory of God is the vindication of Christ, this wounded healer... God's infinite mercy and love could not be buried in the tomb, God's creative life-giving power could not be negated by the powers of sin and death. God's yes prevailed over sinful humanity's no. And the message of repentance, our need to change our way of thinking and claim our identity as God's beloved children, is a message to be shared with all people... We don't celebrate an empty tomb as much as we celebrate the presence of the Crucified-Risen Lord at a table that has room for all!

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are..." It's an amazing thing to be called the children of God. This good news of the gospel is universal in its scope and scandalously particular in its articulation. The Church today must remember that the blessings of God in Jesus Christ transcend racial, ethnic, gendered, and heteronormative prejudices. It is good news for everyone *without exception*.

With the daily news of the pandemic, and yet another mass shooting and two more shootings of young black men by police this past week; in a world full of warfare and violence, of terror and tragedy, God knows we are hungry for new life. God knows we hunger and thirst for more authentic community.

So, here's the thing, this means we need to take responsibility for how we live. John makes the provocative assertion that, "No one who abides in [Christ] sins" and conversely, "no one who sins has either seen Christ or known him." The term "abides" here is important. It means being in communion with God, remaining in relationship with God. And the word "sins" is better translated "keeps on sinning": "No one who *keeps on sinning* has either seen Christ or known him."

Forget the idea that if you are a Christian you aren't going to sin. That's foolish. I think what John means here is that if you are a Christian you aren't going to give up on Christ's power to forgive and form you into the human God created and calls you to be.

The only way to live a just life, a life that is pleasing to God, is to humbly live in communion with God, which means a life of *daily* faith and repentance. This gets worked out in community. As we share life, the good the bad, and the ugly, we receive and share God's grace and forgiveness. This is the *communion* we are called to share with Christ, and the *community* we are called to share with one another.

Which brings us, finally, to the ethics of Easter... As we are in communion with God and with one another, we can't help but remember the poor and hungry, the outcasts of our world, those wondering this week as we wait for the George Floyd trial verdict whether their lives matter at all. Perhaps we need to consider ways in which we can care more for those who disbelieve and still wonder?

If we as the children of God have anything to offer the world, it is the simple message of God's love and grace. Ours is but to receive that gift and share it with any who recognize their hunger and thirst for a deeper faith, a better life, a fairer world. Remember the old adage that evangelism is nothing more and nothing less than one beggar telling another beggar where to find food! Perhaps Jesus, risen from the dead, is present and bringing new life to every table at which the hungry are filled, the despised are loved, the outcast are welcome and the poor receive the reign of God?

Although we're not celebrating communion today around the table, even the simplest meal can be a moveable feast, a foretaste of the Easter feast Jesus will serve when the reign of God comes in all its fullness. So, when you sit around a table again today, remember, even with your disbelief and wondering, Jesus comes to you in peace. Perhaps that is the source of our deepest joy, the good news that all people are welcome at the table with Jesus. And from there we will be encouraged, strengthened and sent forth to bear witness in word and deed to the Crucified-Risen Christ to bring hope and joy, love and justice for all. Bon Appetite!

In the name of the One Who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.