

Is There Any Food?

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Eagle River, Wisconsin

April 14, 2024 (Third Sunday of Easter)

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Every pastor has a good communion story, or more than one. And lots of parishioners do, too. My favorite happened in Rhinelander. Rather like our Soup and Service sessions during Lent, we used to have a Wednesday evening meal followed by a brief worship service. The worship service after the meal always included communion by intinction. Every week a member of the church, who worked in a local school cafeteria, would bake a loaf of bread, which would arrive fresh from the oven in the late afternoon. And yes, the bread was very good.

During our communion service, I would break that loaf of fresh bread, place half of it off to the side on the communion table, and people would come forward to receive their pieces of bread from the half of the loaf that I held out to them. Since we never had a large group for these services, the half loaf that I had put aside would hardly ever be needed. One evening, as people were coming forward to receive the bread and dip it into the chalice, I noticed that upon their return to their places, they were looking with surprise—either smiling or horrified—at the scenario that was unfolding by the communion table. Little Zoe, age seven, had grabbed the unused half loaf of bread from the table, and having plunked herself down on the chancel steps, was stuffing her face with the bread. “I was hungry,” she told me later.

Another communion story happened just a month or so ago in our church. Pastor Tim reversed the order of the distribution of the elements. We received the cup first, and then

the bread. Which led me to wonder at first, as I picked up my little plastic cup of juice, if I had perhaps blacked out during the distribution of the bread, and missed it. But then the bread did come, which was somehow reassuring. The reversal of the elements was a topic of conversation during coffee hour.

On such occasions, when something went wrong during communion, there were suppressed grins from members of the congregation, or not so suppressed grins. Humor always involves an element of surprise, of incongruity. Like when Sarah laughed when God told her that she, at her very advanced age, was going to have a child. She laughed and then denied having laughed. It would be disrespectful, of course. But in one of the most endearing lines of the Hebrew scriptures, God said to Sarah, “But you did laugh.”

In those communion moments I’ve referred to, the incongruity, and hence the humor, had to do not so much with what happened but with the context in which what had happened happened. Communion is supposed to be very solemn, contemplative, serious, holy. We call it “Holy Communion,” after all. And yet, on these occasions when things had gone a bit awry, in the midst of all that holiness and solemnity, something supremely human took place; something that broke the mood, provoked surprise and, except among the most tightly wound people, delight.

Our lectionary passage from Luke for this third Sunday of Easter has this kind of effect on me. One of my favorite passages of the New Testament immediately precedes it. In it, the resurrected Christ shared a long walk and some serious discussion about himself with two people who are called his disciples. But, even with the friendly walk and the theological discourse, which really should have struck some familiar chords, they still hadn’t recognized Jesus when they reached their destination in Emmaus, and Jesus prepared to go on. But, being hospitable Middle Easterners, they invited Jesus to stay with them for a meal. And it was only when he broke the bread that they realized who he was. There is so much to unpack and to savor in that account. But that’s for another day

in the lectionary calendar. What is particularly resonant in it, though, is what we recall during our communion services, when we say that we recognize Jesus “in the breaking of the bread.”

Today’s passage continues that account, but now it’s later in the evening and there are more disciples present, and now they’re in Jerusalem. Like the two who walked with Jesus to Emmaus, the members of the Jerusalem group also had trouble recognizing Jesus. They thought he was a ghost. “If you don’t think it’s me, look at my hands and my feet and my side,” he told them. And then comes the part that surprises me, and, I’ll confess, makes me smile. “Do you have any food here?” he asks, kind of like a ravenous teenager after school. “Is there any food?” Our lord and savior, who died an excruciating death on the cross, and then overcame death, is hungry. And it seems almost . . . unseemly. Luke tells us simply that he then ate a piece of broiled fish.

Jesus was accused by his critics of partying hearty, and yet somehow when we commune with the resurrected Christ, we’re supposed to be very serious, very solemn, and we’re to restrict our consumption to little chunks of bread and little glasses of juice, or wine. And no smiling, please. The resurrected Christ is apparently not nearly as much fun as the historical Jesus was.

In today’s passage, Luke is making a point, a really important point. What he really wants us to know is that the Jesus who appeared before the two disciples in Emmaus, and the others in Jerusalem, wasn’t a disembodied spirit. He wasn’t a ghost. This Jesus had the marks of the nails on his hands and feet, and still had the wound in his side. This was a very human, and a very hungry, Jesus—an embodied Jesus.

Because we are modern people, schooled by science, we have trouble with miracles. And so we often try to explain them away by considering them to be metaphorical. So perhaps Jesus’ casting out of demons wasn’t so much an employment of magic as it was skillful

therapy for people with mental illness, for example. And, I'll confess that I'm often persuaded by such explanations, largely because there is almost always a point beyond the miracle itself. Curing people on the Sabbath didn't have so much to do with the actual miracle of healing as it did with Jesus' deeper message about the Sabbath having been created for us, and not the other way around. Faith is for people, not to propitiate some imagined unreasonable tyrant God. The changing of water that was supposed to be used for purification into fine wine at the wedding in Cana had to do more with transformation of the commonplace into the holy, what we call a sacrament, than it did Jesus' skill as a sommelier or vintner.

But I think that Luke's insistence on the embodied resurrected Christ is to be taken seriously. The writer John Updike, whose novels are not known for their religiosity—although there is a lot of theology in them—said this about the resurrection in a poem:

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,
Making of the event a parable, a sign
painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages:
Let us walk through the door.

Updike acknowledges, and honors, what all of the gospel writers, including the usually ethereal John, insist on: "the resurrection of the body." It was a deliberate poke in the eye of the gnosticism of the time, which focused entirely on the soul at the expense of the body. For the gnostics, the body was a prison for the soul; it was something to escape, or at least to denigrate, but certainly not to honor. And that is an issue with which we still grapple.

We struggle because there's still a lot of gnosticism in us, we who like to think of ourselves as "spiritual" people. And I will confess that I'm coming to regard my body, if not as a

prison, at least as a problem, and not so much a blessing anymore. I can join enthusiastically into conversations with my contemporaries that we facetiously call “organ recitals,” dreary accounts of things that are going wrong with our bodies. And yet the eternal is present in our bodies even as they deteriorate, as they inevitably do.

At a reunion, a college friend asked me about the resurrection, “What do you really believe?” I didn’t give a very cogent answer. But he made me think, and this sermon is kind of my answer at least to myself. I concluded—and perhaps this is a dodge— that it’s irrelevant what I believe, because what I believe has to do with my head, not my heart; with self-interested calculation, not with faith.

What I believe probably has no importance beyond my earthly life. But what I trust has a lot to do with what I do with my earthly life, how I live it, and how, ultimately, I will die. William Sloane Coffin, my pastor in New York, used to say that “faith is not belief without evidence; it is trust without reservation.” I trust that the creation came into being out of the initiative of a benevolent impulse; I trust that Jesus was a fusion of the ineffable divine and the effable human, and that we share that combination of the divine and the human, that there is a sustaining momentum, a spirit that continues to manifest itself in communities of faith where people do unexpectedly loving things even when it is not to their advantage. What, on the other hand, sustains the cynic in the end? Perhaps the declaration, “You see, I was right!” But if the cynic is right, what is the point of that triumphant assertion? It’s rather like the epitaph of the hypochondriac, “I told you I was sick.”

When the disciples gathered to choose Judas’ replacement, they rolled the dice or drew straws, but the one requirement was that the new twelfth disciple, who turned out to be Mathias, had to have been “a witness to the resurrection.” And that is the challenge of Easter. Are you a witness to the resurrection? Do you trust in a love that doesn’t die, no matter how hard people try to kill it?

Let's take one last lingering look at our passage from Luke, and at the other post-Easter narratives. Notice how nobody recognizes Jesus, regardless of how well they thought they knew him: they don't recognize him despite the most persuasive evidence of his opening the scriptures, his invocation of prophecy, his companionable presence on the road. Nobody recognizes Jesus until he actually does something—breaks bread, calls Mary by name, eats fish, tells the disciples where to fish, prepares breakfast. Nor will we recognize Jesus until we do something that puts us on the Way toward the ultimate. Jesus is not the destination. Jesus is the Way that makes the most sense to me as a Christian without denying other ways. This way is never a dead end street; it is ever open to us. As the hymn puts it, he is the one who “sends a shining ray far down the future's broadening way.” And he is the Truth beyond all of our earnest head trips. And, to complete John's triad, calling Jesus the Way, the Truth and the Life, Jesus is the Life, the one who tells us that death never has the last word, that our lives have meaning, even, and maybe especially, at their end. Amen.